



Tasmanian College of the Arts

University of Tasmania

**Mirrored Resonance: exploring
an aesthetics of engagement**

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Statement of Originality

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Abstract

The aim of this project is to explore the appearing of the world; the manner in which the ordinary, everyday world is 'there' for a perceiving subject. This philosophical enquiry is undertaken through a phenomenological approach to photographic practice which explores looking as a participatory and embodied form of engagement with the world.

The project takes light as evidence of the appearing world. I work with a precisely organised photographic apparatus to make light, rather than the objects illuminated by light, evident. The apparatus is a glass bowl filled with water, positioned in-relation-to an expansive view. The images are composed so that the reflective surface of water fills the lower third of the frame. This portion of the image is in focus, and the remainder is softly focused. The images do not visually reference the scene in front of the camera as it appears to the naked eye. What the image shows and what I can see through the viewfinder, is a field of light structured by the relations between proximity and distance. These formal parameters both delimit the field of enquiry and align with the pictorial conventions of landscape representation.

As the project progressed, I maintained this reductive approach to composition, working with the landscape convention stripped to bare bones (foreground, background and horizon). I became more and more interested in how spatial qualities are registered somatically at subtle, physical and emotional levels. It is the subtle nuance of these often hidden and unarticulated relations which I am aiming to bring forward in the resulting artworks.

This exploration led to a formal analysis of the philosophical concept of aura, drawing upon the writing primarily of Walter Benjamin, Diarmuid Costello, Gunter Figal and Theodor Adorno. I define aura as a relation of intimate distance, between the perceiving subject and the perceptual object. In this project, aura is characterised by fluid, mobile relations and an integrative movement between proximity and distance that does not collapse or undermine that distance. In conclusion, the work amplifies perceptual, structural and aesthetic relations between embodied self and the environing world.

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This body of work is dedicated to my parents Nicolaas and Edna van der Beek and my whanau in Aotearoa.

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Introduction

Two studies are being conducted side by side; one is a philosophical enquiry and the other a photographic project. As a whole, the study is guided by a Heideggerian approach to phenomenology, 'to make manifest the structure of our everyday being-in-the-world' (Dreyfus & Wrathall 2009, p. 3). The philosophical enquiry is undertaken through a phenomenological approach to photographic practice. The photographic apparatus is employed to maintain the consistently tight formal parameters of the philosophical enquiry, delimiting the study to the phenomenon in question, *the appearing world*.

Relations to the appearing world are explored through a concrete mode of experiential engagement. The starting place for this study, the context, is the ordinary world, the world outside my back door; the world that surrounds me/the world that includes me in its purview. The phenomenological method and the photographic practice are utilised to bring the appearing world, as the background of everyday consciousness, *forward*.

Awareness of the world is orientated by spatial relations; everyday human experience can be understood as structured in terms of proximity and distance. The horizon is the indeterminate place where proximity gives way to distance, where the close by and surrounding environment becomes far away and eventually invisible. Given the relevance of depth perception to everyday experience, atmospheric perspective is accorded significance across the breadth of this study. I have worked purposefully with atmospheric perspective, which William Dunning (1991, p. 46) describes as a method

by which salient aspects of the image plane are characterised by focus, detail and brightness and recessive aspects are characterised by softness, lack of detail and shadowy darks.

The photographic project takes light as evidence of the appearing world and constructs a specific apparatus to collect evidence of this appearing. The purpose is to make light, in distinction to the objects illuminated by light, *evidential*. With this in mind, a small body of water held close to the body/the eye/the lens is studied in-relation-to the distant sky. The reflective surface of water brings the distant light forward, not literally, but puts the light, as it were, under the eye so that it can be looked at and studied. Distant light appears a second time, on the surface of the water.

The method focuses on the relations between the reflective surface of water (as that which appears in proximity) and the surrounding atmosphere (as that which appears distant). The sensitivity of the relation between sky and water becomes more prescient and compelling given how the surface of water both reflects light and registers the smallest movements of air flow. My purpose is to translate the aesthetic qualities of the spatial relations between proximity and distance, such as depth, throw and reach to the resulting images.

Attending to first person experience in-relation-to the natural environment is at the heart of this project. The method is grounded in the exploration of the self as both individuated from and contextualised by the surrounding physical environment. Given how phenomenology invites us, as David Abram (2014, p. vii) puts it, to pay 'close

attention to our directly felt experience', this study oscillates between internal, subjective experience and the external, objective world.

I am in agreement with Dan Zahavi (2003, p. 73) when he states:

subjectivity - the experiential dimension - is not a self-enclosed mental realm; rather, subjectivity and worlds are ... co-dependent and inseparable. Subjectivity is essentially oriented and open towards that which it is not, and it is exactly in this openness that it reveals itself to itself.

This study is contextualised by what Zahavi describes as *openness* to that which one is not. I emphasise looking, as active, participatory and embodied engagement with the world that I am both *a part of and apart from*.

I have given particular emphasis to the embodied aspect of the perceptual encounter in play between artworks and viewers. As a general rule all artworks are perceptual encounters; however, different artworks can amplify or underplay the importance of embodied reception to the overall import of the work. The MFA exhibition highlights the perceptual encounter between the viewer and the image, by emphasising the artwork's presence, as a physical object, in-relation-to the physical presence of the viewer.

I have aimed to emphasise the images as autonomous, visual objects; as distinct from representations of objectified aspects of the world, by emphasising the causal relation between the camera's light sensor and the world in front of the camera lens. I have

worked with soft focus as a means of emphasising colour and subtle shifts in tonal gradation over identifiable visual objects without compromising the veracity of the world in front of the lens. I have worked with clearly delineated formal parameters, collecting images from the same site over a period of three years while maintaining a consistent compositional structure.

The resulting images are aimed to function as “natural landscapes” by exploring light as the aspect of the environing world that the photographic instrument is best suited to evidence. At the same time, I do not hide connections to the pictorial conventions of landscape representation. The images are aimed to oscillate between readings of landscape in-relation-to the appearing world and in-relation-to the western tradition of landscape representation.

My challenge has been to underscore relations between light and reality, by emphasising the causal bond between the camera sensor and the world in front of the camera lens. At the same time, I maintain the consistent parameters of the landscape convention, as the frame through which this world appears.

Within the landscape tradition, the analogy of a door or a window is often used to suggest that the viewer might imagine moving towards and stepping into the image. I am also interested in the analogy of the doorway as an aperture through which light moves towards the viewer. I am aiming for an implied movement forwards towards the image and forwards towards the standing body of the viewer; from here to there and from there to here. I propose the place where these two subtle movements cross, is the

relational field between the viewer and the work and that, the viewer enrolled by these two movements, is immersed in a field of subtle spatio-temporal relations.

I put forward the concept of aura as relevant to the self/world relation. I explore how aura, structured by relations between proximity and distance, is comprised of significant, fragile and fleeting, invisible, affect based sensations. More than any other defining feature: aura involves the registration of subtle exchanges between self and environment.

While I pay attention to the transference of visual information from the world in front of the lens to the photographic image, my primary interest is in the *auratic* medium that structures perceptual experience. I propose that the experiential nexus of auratic relations is the same whether the perceptual object is the natural environment or an artwork. My claim is that auratic relations are made evidential, primarily by means of the autonomous stature of both the world and the artwork. I aim to demonstrate this circumstance by means of the viewer's experiential engagement with the resulting artworks.

Project outline

The project has progressed via three main areas of investigation. The first area loosely correlates with a phenomenological approach to looking which is attentive to an attraction to light and colour, somatic and affective responses to light and colour, and correspondences between beauty and affect. The second area explores relations between proximity and distance. The third area maps the relational character of engagement

between self and natural environment, between the natural environment and the work and between the work and the viewer.

The exegesis is in four parts; the first chapter describes the initial explorations undertaken during a field trip in north-western New South Wales. At the conclusion of the field trip, I analysed the results and identified an approach which brings the relations between proximity and distance into immediacy. This approach consequently defined the working method. As a form of applied phenomenology, this study is orientated primarily by experiential investigations (the photographic practice). Since October 2014 I have worked solely from my front yard at White Beach with the result that all of the MFA exhibition images are orientated towards the same outlook. Contemporary photographers such as Hiroshi Sugimoto and Ori Gersht are referenced in regards to a formal approach to composition.

The second chapter, The Phenomenology of the Practice, explores the term landscape as a conceptual bridge between the natural environment and representations of that environment. The etymology of “landscape” includes both lived, embodied experience of the natural world and a pictorial representation or image of that world. In my practice, I am exploring the overlap between landscape as place and landscape as picture. Of specific interest is the crossover between the real and its representation. I am probing the translation of visual information from place to picture, by tracking the translation of the scene in front of the camera to the visual field (accessed by looking through the viewfinder), to the resulting images. I explore the question of the relation

between place and the appearing world and the showing of the work via a reading of Gunter Figal's (2010), *Aesthetics as Phenomenology : the appearance of things*.

Chapter Three, Aura, investigates aura as a medium that structures experience in terms of spatial relations between proximity and distance. The discussion of aura is threaded through with the notion of intimate distance, whether regarding the natural environment or artworks: auratic experience is characterised by a relation with the world that is overwhelmingly immersive and intimate while the world remains paradoxically, distant and autonomous.

Chapter Three, Part One, explores Walter Benjamin's notion of aura, with secondary sources including Diarmuid Costello (2005), Theodor Adorno (1984), Gunter Figal (2010) and George Markus (2009). The purpose of this section is to give an account of aura as a philosophical concept.

Chapter Three, Part Two, moves the discussion closer to the pragmatic aspects of my phenomenological study. I discuss factors which contribute to the apprehension of auratic relations such as atmosphere and involuntary memory. I explore beauty as integrative between self and the world, which leads to a discussion of the concretely perceptual yet subtle spatial, temporal and mobile aspects of auratic relations, which I suggest are registered at the level of affect.

Chapter Four, The Phenomenology of the Work, explores the specifically photographic relation between the image and the world. The primary questions investigated are: what

determines the relation between the world in front of the camera lens and the resulting photographic image? What could be said to have translated from the natural environment to the image? What does this translation show? In what manner is the showing of the image evidential of the relation between the world and the image?

The above questions are interspersed with an analysis of the resulting artworks. I discuss how spatial considerations, namely; proximity and distance, open and closed, surface and depth, fullness and emptiness, contraction and expansion are operating in the images. My purpose is to explore how the experiential aspect of aura is composed of subtle spatial and temporal relations which mirror the structural basis of perception.

In summary, my aim has been to bring my focused attention to the relation between a small body of water and distant light, to study the phenomena, *in its appearing*. I am attentive to somatic responses to light and colour and the emotional experience of beauty. My purpose is to amplify affective nuances to emphasise the connective tissue between the perceptual experience of the natural environment and the perceptual experience of pictorial images.

The first chapter offers an overview of the method; the second chapter explores relations between self and envioning world; the fourth chapter emphasises relations between the world and the resulting photographic images and the relations between the artwork and the viewer. In Chapter Three, aura is put forward as significant to these three modes of relation: self to world, world to work, work to viewer. Aura is the connective thread moving between these three fields of aesthetic engagement.

Chapter One - Early explorations, method and context

The Ochre House field trip

Early in the project, mid-winter 2014, I undertook a solo field trip based at The Ochre House, Fowlers Gap Research Station, north-east of Broken Hill, Fig. 1 below. The aim was to experience first-hand, a physically expansive landscape and to explore the almost physiological attraction of distant light. A month in a remote location supported sustained, absorbed and concentrated looking. I find there is a gentle vulnerability in this experience of looking, a flavour of immediacy and an attitude of open enquiry; qualities heightened for being relatively rare in busy modern life.



Fig. 1. Susan van der Beek, *The Ochre House, Fowlers Gap*, 2014

During the field trip, I explored various approaches to purposefully shift the photographic apparatus away from its inherent programming (the point and shoot approach which produces a visual copy of the world in front of the camera lens as it appears to the naked eye).

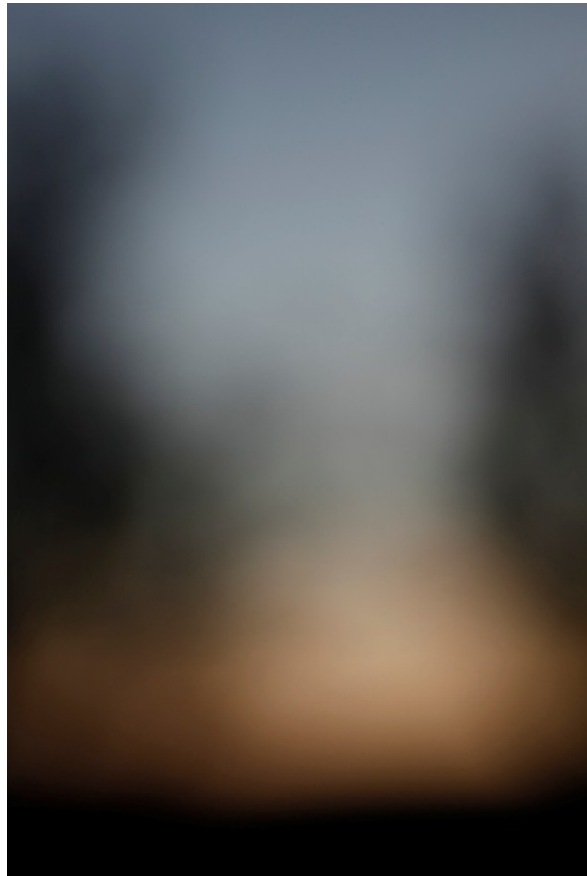


Fig. 2. Susan van der Beek, *Fowlers Gap*, 6:42 pm, 01/08/2014

Initially, I experimented with constructing images out of simple figure and ground components as a method of exploring positive and negative space as in Fig. 2 above. Evenly dark toned areas at the bottom and on the margins read as smoke like smudges against a softly toned, coloured ground. The central brightest area forms a positive

shape which pushes forward, reversing the more common reading of backgrounds as recessive.

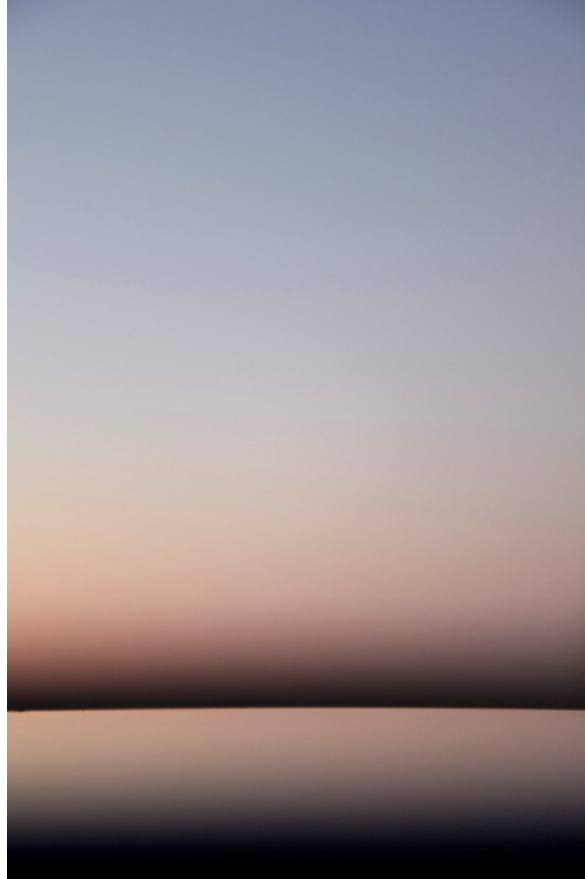


Fig. 3. Susan van der Beek, Fowlers Gap, 7:00 pm, 28/07/2014

I found that the spacious, uncluttered topography at Fowlers Gap lent itself to a reductive approach to landscape photography. I photographed the reflective surface of water in-relation-to the surrounding atmosphere reduced to the basic elements of pictorial landscapes: ground, horizon and sky. This approach revealed the relation between these pictorial elements and the foreground and background components of the traditional picture plane. The result was a series of compositionally pared back,

figuratively empty and spatially expansive colour field studies as in Fig. 3, previous page.

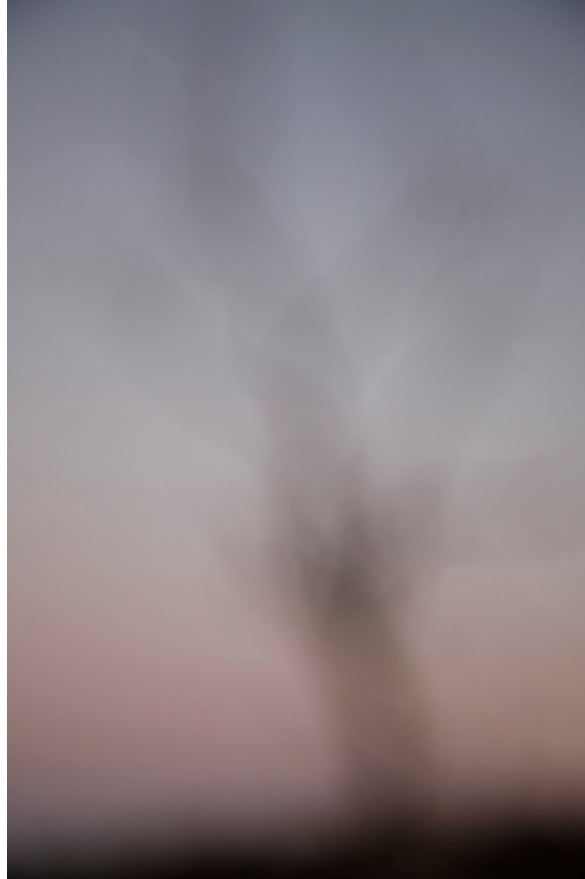


Fig. 4. Susan van der Beek, *Fowlers Gap, 8:00 am, 02/08/2014*

I worked purposefully with the camera as a light sensing machine; exploring the idea that the camera is designed to be sensitive to particles of light, emphasising this aspect over visual resemblance. For instance, in Fig. 4 above, I explored how soft focus renders dead standing trees into overlapping semi-transparent bands against a ground of evenly gradated, subtly toned colour provided by the intense, pristine clarity of light at dawn and dusk.

I find the subtlety of these wide bands delineated by thin areas of bright white light visually complex. I have noticed that my eye is physically active in finding edges and tracing the thin bright lines between the wider bands. Distorted by soft focus, the image above does not show itself for what it is to the naked eye.

Fig. 4 reminds me of drawing media such as pencil and graphite and drawing methods, like using an eraser to reveal the white of the paper underneath a diffuse ground of charcoal. My intention is to explore how photographic images can stimulate a plethora of mental associations, beyond associations triggered by the representational content of the image.

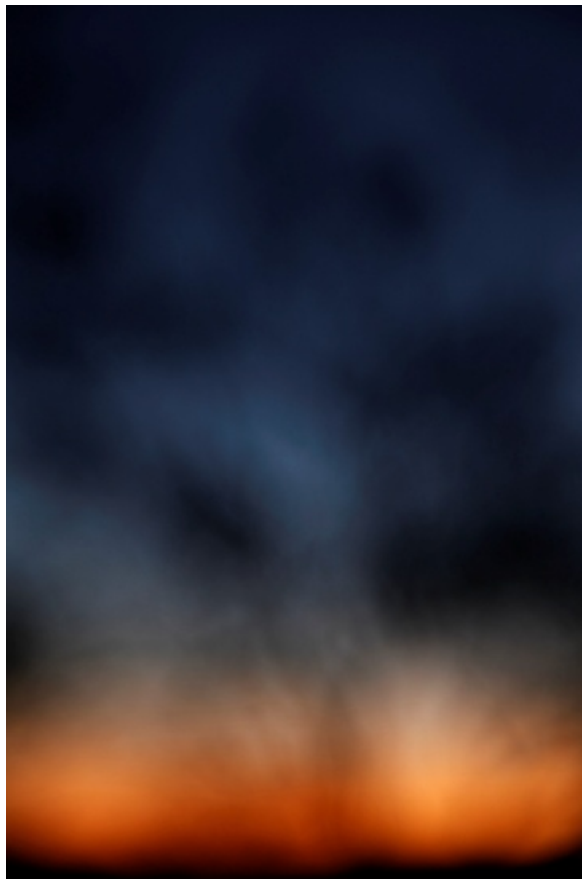


Fig. 5. Susan van der Beek, *Fowlers Gap, 7:23 pm, 06/08/2014*

Fig. 5 above is composed of simple elements and maintains the conventional figure-ground relation. The vertical format emphasises the gradation of colour tones in the background, from blue/black to deep blue to paler warmer tones, to yellow, to orange to black. Vertical orientation gives the sky greater vertiginous depth or fall. Depth is engaged over the whole trajectory by weighting and anchoring the image at its lowest edge; as if the bottom edge was dipped in a shallow tray of black ink or burnt. Comparative to this edge, the sky appears to rise or float upwards and simultaneously fall or drift downwards. Dark cloud like forms sit on the front planar surface, and the lighter areas behind the darks push through. My intention was to explore how soft focus renders the scene in front of the camera lens ambiguous and produces an image composed of darks and lights, saturated colour and tonal gradation.

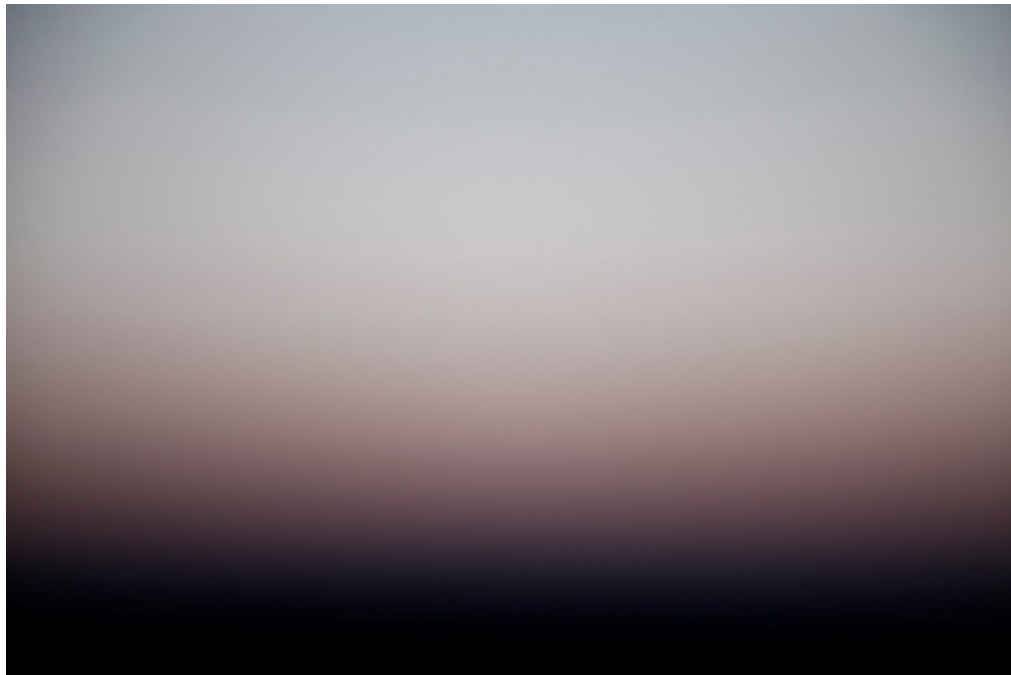


Fig. 6. Susan van der Beek, *Fowlers Gap*, 6:52 , 30/07/2014

In Fig. 6 above I explored how a photographic image might evoke volume. The lightest area appears to be gently pushing forward like a giant rolling mist. Simultaneously wide coloured bands of light appear to be drifting downward, coalescing and gathering at the base of the print. In reading this image, it is as if a lighter substance floats above a weightier substance (rather than simply a relation between lights and darks). The lightest area (hue and weight) is comparatively large and expansive. The heavier, gravitational mass of the lower dark area is relatively confined, pressed and concentrated; as if the sheer expanse of the sky presses down on the earth.

I also notice that the formless light has an animating quality as if there was not one source of light, but countless minuscule glowing particles. I associate this effect with Bill Henson's (2015) use of the phrase 'particle mist' to describe his early, evocative soft focused photography. This image helped me to identify how the sky might translate as a circumambient and surrounding, immersive atmosphere.

Refining the method

In the next series of investigations, I explored how an image might offer entry and invitation and read as somehow open specifically by exploring how an image could withhold or remain closed. My purpose is to investigate how an image can invite *and* withdraw from engagement.

I have aimed to amplify relations held in common between experiential and pictorial landscapes, for instance, by reducing the images solely to the pictorial elements of foreground and background and therefore to amplify the spatial relations between

proximity and distance. Another strategy is to accommodate the viewer's whole body in-relation-to the physical scale (150 x 100 cm) and portrait orientation of the prints. As the visual content of each image gives no definitive or referential indication of scale, the viewer is invited to wonder (kinaesthetically) what the relations of scale might be between the landscape and themselves.

When I returned to Tasmania, I continued to experiment with the reductive approach outlined above, photographing from the ocean facing beach at Eaglehawk Neck. In this series I explored relations between proximal, salient, foregrounds and distant, recessive, backgrounds (see Fig. 7 below). The result was that the images are less descriptive of a landscape or view in a literal sense, less mimetically accurate, and yet evocative of the landscape in universal terms.

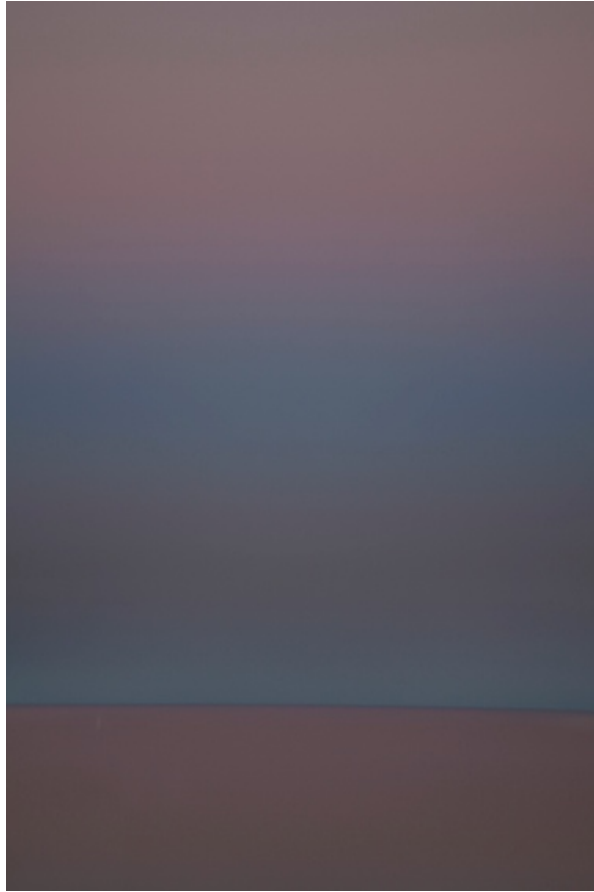


Fig. 7. Susan van der Beek, *Eaglehawk Neck*, 06/09/2014

I was interested in how the lower surface acted as a barrier to any reading of horizontal recession or depth and in consistently maintaining the impenetrable flatness of this perpendicular surface as closed compared to the accessibility and openness of the diffuse, semi-transparent background. In reading this image, it is as if one dense surface has slid across another open, porous surface. As if a rectangular piece of glass was spray painted in drifts of light blue and dusky pink, and then the upper section masked out and the lower section solidly filled in with dense, opaque acrylic paint.

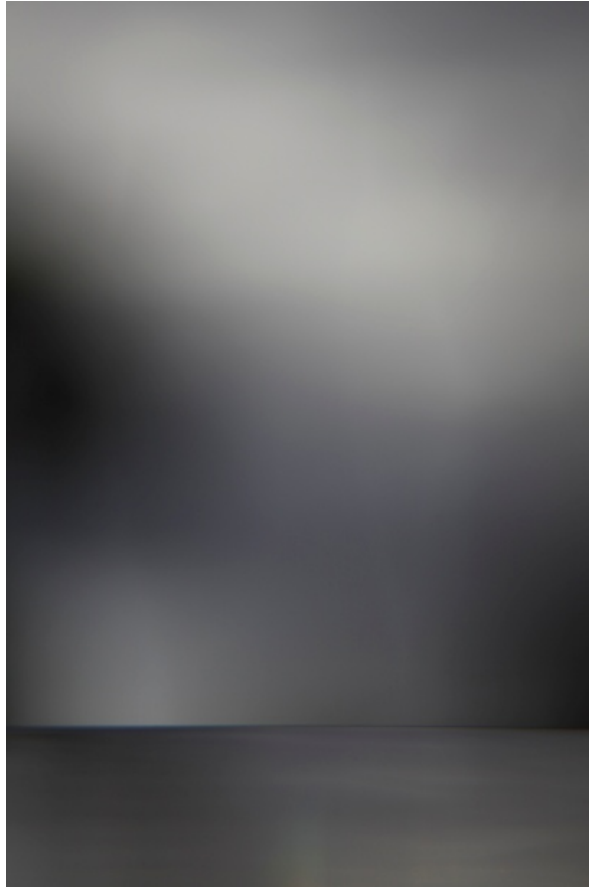


Fig. 8. Susan van der Beek, *untitled*, 15/03/2015

Fig. 8 above is from a series of mid to late afternoon tests on an overcast day, which resulted in near monochromatic images. I experimented with moving between narrow and wide lens extension rings, specifically looking at how to amplify shallow depth of field to push the reduction further. Lens extension rings are hollow tubes lined with black velvet, attached to the lens. The rings narrow the focal band and increase background softness; so that whatever is close to the lens is in focus, and everything else is soft. Combining narrow and wide rings produces the greatest degree of blur and magnification. From this point, October 2014, I am photographing consistently from the same location, my front yard at White Beach, Tasmania.

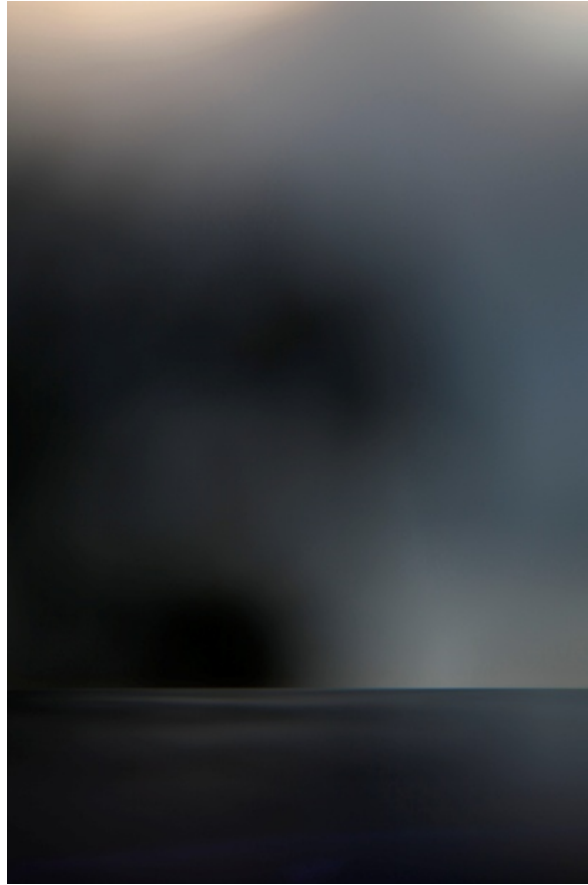


Fig. 9. Susan van der Beek, *untitled*, 02/07/2015

Working in monochrome was a useful approach to explore a basic grammar of lights and darks. Fig. 9 is constructed primarily, in addition to lights and darks, from the elements of soft and sharp, delineated edges and bleeding forms. The sharply defined rectangular form of the foreground contrasts with the amorphous spaciousness of the background; in this manner, the background reads as accessible and therefore open, and the foreground reads as comparatively solid and therefore closed. I find the foreground and background work in-relation-to each other as if the image is composed of a process of withholding and allowing, contraction and expansion, opening and closing, revealing and obscuring.

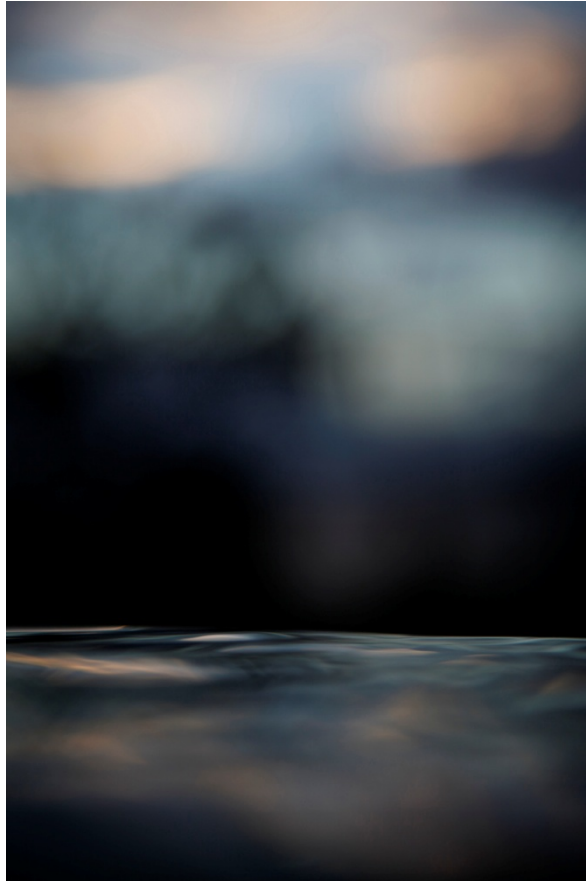


Fig. 10. Susan van der Beek, *untitled iv (from White Beach)*, 2015

Fig. 10 is seductively beautiful in terms of colour, demonstrating a capacity to stimulate interest; drawing the viewer forward and at the same time the eye is prevented from travelling through in one recessive movement. In viewing this image, I find I can toggle between reading the lower section as a perpendicular, vertical surface, as a horizontal, recessive depth and as if looking down from above. Perpendicular surfaces tend to read as closed, pushing the viewer out, and recessive surfaces tend to read as open, inviting the viewer into the image space. In regards Fig. 10, I am interested in the oscillation between a sense of invitation and a sense of being pushed back from the image space.

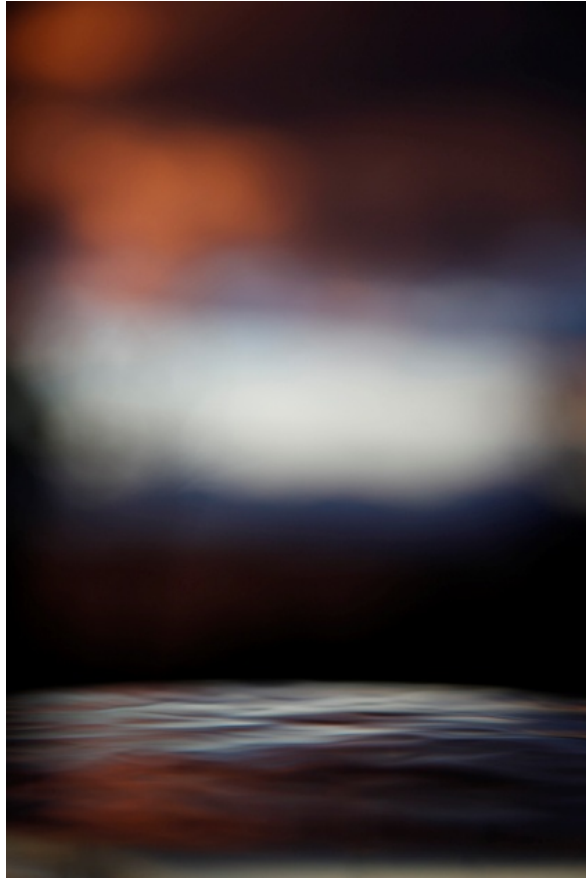


Fig. 11. Susan van der Beek, *untitled*, 19/03/2015

The horizon in Fig. 11 is softly focused, and the reflective surface reads as horizontal and recessive across its full breadth. The ambiguous horizon blends the far reaches of the reflective surface into a dark recessive void. Horizontal depth and distance are implied across and compressed within the recessional plane of the foreground. Saliency is provided by the dusky orange clouds in the top left mirrored in the bottom left, and everything else falls away behind this plane. Access through to the distance is given by the manner in which pictorial space opens and invites entry. In my experience of reading this image, the relationship between the lower, middle and upper sections of the

image draws me into a constant cycling between foreground and background, salience and depth.

I have identified three approaches to the horizon. In the first approach, (see Figs 7-9) the horizon is sharply defined, and the water reads as a perpendicular, salient, opaque, concentrated surface. The surface is pressing and forward and somewhat of an impenetrable barrier. The images are essentially composed of two surfaces, one closed and one open and the transition between foreground and background is abrupt.

In the second approach (Fig. 10) the horizon line is neither uniformly sharp nor soft. The transition between these two sections of the image plane is by various degrees, abrupt or gradual given the variations between sharply and softly defined horizons. I find I can oscillate between reading the foreground as perpendicular or recessive.

In the third approach (Fig. 11) the horizon is soft, the surface of water is recessive across its breadth, and the distance implied across this surface draws the viewer towards the far reaches.

All three approaches confine focus to the foreground and across all three approaches, the reflective surface appears to pull the far-away, amorphous light into salience and immediacy so that the sky reads as simultaneously close and distant. I find I am continuously looking between the concentrated and contained to the open and expansive. In my experience, the foreground and background considered in-relation-to

each other imply a subtle movement: pulsing and dilating between contraction and expansion.

In analysing these three approaches, I have explored how open and closed, full and empty, surface and depth, salient and recessive, contraction and expansion can operate within the image plane. I have tested various approaches to the horizon, to either preserve or collapse the tension between foreground and background, proximity and distance. As the project proceeded, I continued to explore these parameters, working with the body of water as a fluid, muscular palimpsest and as a mirror like surface.

The landscape convention

Historical antecedents to a reductive approach to composition can be seen early within the landscape genre. Jan van Goyen's (1646) *View of Haarlem and the Haarlemmer Meer* (Fig. 12) is structured by the division of earth/sea and sky into foreground and background, comprising the lower and upper sections of the image plane respectively. The foreground reads as recessive across its breadth; from the golden light in the bottom left corner to the still, almost white surface of the Meer in the centre of the foreground, to the small intrusions into the sky on the horizon; distance is compressed within a narrow band at the bottom of the image plane. The foreground is dominated by linear, horizontal elements, a swathe of brown/green in the lower section and a swathe of blue/white/green in the upper section. Human figures, haystacks, windmills and buildings are discerned as protruding details. An expansive sky dominates the painting. Dark clouds appear as if directly above the foreground, receding to the distant portion of the sky just above the horizon.



Fig. 12. Jan van Goyen, *View of Haarlem and the Haarlemmer Meer*, 1646

I am interested in aspects of the landscape convention held in common between the van Goyen above and the contemporary images that follow; such as dividing the image plane into two portions. In general, foregrounds tend to have more detail than backgrounds. Horizons can be relatively high or low, for example in the middle of the image plane as with Sugimoto's Seascape series, or low as with the van Goyen. Landscapes tend to be dominated by horizontal striations. Lights and darks can variously move forward or recede (there is no hard and fast rule to this aspect, for instance, the dark clouds in the van Goyen appear salient and the lighter far horizon recessive).



Fig. 13. Hiroshi Sugimoto *Aegean Sea, Pillon*, 1990

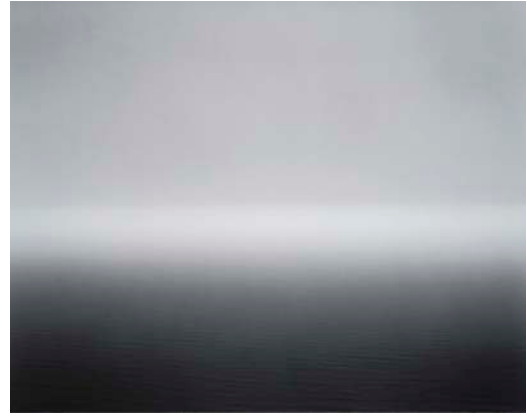


Fig. 14. Hiroshi Sugimoto *Ligurian Sea, near Savio*, 1993

Within a reductive approach to the landscape convention, I am looking at various treatments of the horizon. Hiroshi Sugimoto explores a variety of approaches to the horizon in his long term and ongoing Seascapes series. Sugimoto's *Aegean Sea, Pillon*, Fig. 13, provides an indeterminate horizon, located somewhere in the centre of the image, where the tonal gradation of lights at the top gives way to darks at the bottom, and a perpendicular surface gives way to a recessive space.

In Fig. 14, *Ligurian Sea, near Savio*, light tones at the top and dark grey tones at the bottom are intersected by a band of bright white light across the centre. This bright band can be read as salient as if sitting forward: as if distant light on the water is moving forwards and as if this light is drifting down the image plane; as if the sea is not recessive, but a flat, vertical surface.

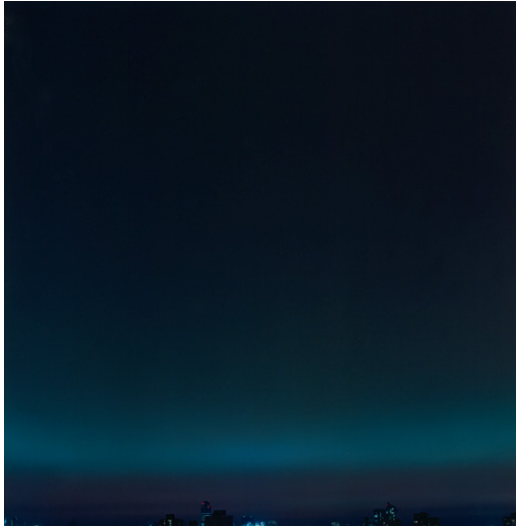


Fig. 15. Ori Gersht, *Rear Window 1*,
From the series *Rear Window*, 2000

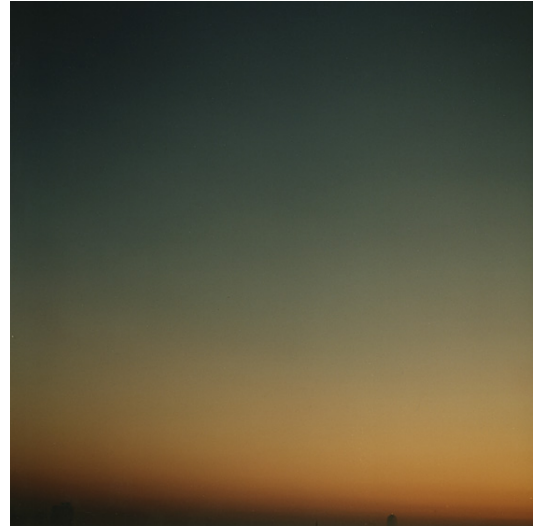


Fig. 16. Ori Gersht, *Rear Window 5*
From the series *Rear Window*, 2000

Ori Gersht's *Rear Window 1* is relevant to my project in terms of Gersht's handling of vast areas of atmospheric luminosity and colour. Depth is provided by the vertical rather than the horizontal plane and the ground is indicated by the barely visible, intrusion of high rise buildings. The band of soft mauve behind the high rises recedes, and it is as if all the horizontal distance; distance away and across, is compressed into this tight band. The brightest area, the cerulean blue above the mauve, brightest in its centre, appears to press forward, carrying with it the weight of the dark mass of coloured light above.

Regarding pictorial space, the image plane can move in three directions, backwards, forwards or give a reading of vertical depth (falling or rising). The image plane can also refuse movement and maintain its stability as a flat surface. With Ori Gersht's *Rear Window 5*, there appears to be both a recessive space, a void that one could fall into, a positive shape that gently pulses forward and I can also read the image as a vertical fall of colour across a flat surface.



Fig. 17. Eric Cahan, *The Dunes, Amagansett, Sunset 6:47 pm*



Fig. 18. David Stephenson, *Dawn 23.7.09*
Dawn to Dusk Series, 2009

New York based photographer Eric Cahan uses coloured gels in front of the camera lens to accentuate the intensity of subtle tonal gradation, providing an almost infinite range of gradation over the full range of vertical depth. The detail and brightness of the striated clouds in the lowest section of Fig. 17 above, anchor the otherwise floating colour field to the ground dimension.

David Stephenson's *Dawn 23.7.09*, likewise contains the ground in a narrow band at the bottom of the image. The illusion of horizontal recession, compressed within this tight band, hinges on the white of a wave breaking on a sandbar in the mid-distance. In relation, the amorphous, soft sky is surrounding and encompassing, because it both recedes toward the horizon beyond the shallow white wave and is pushed forward by the lightest area glowing in the centre of the image; the effect is one of intense subtlety.

I am in agreement with Murray Fredricks' rationale or approach to photography, which he describes as:

connected by this desire to explore removing 'the view' from the landscape image, to deny the scene and give what remains (often the more subtle elements) more power, more significance. The clouds, the weather, the light, the peripherals that create the atmosphere become the subjects themselves - but it's still not about that. The rare images that have that sense of 'other' make it into the series (The Oculus 2016).

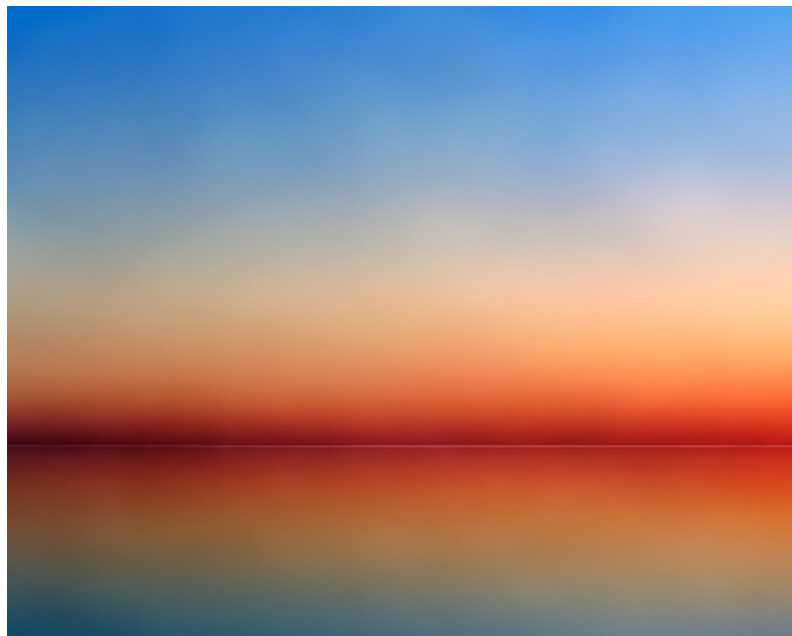


Fig. 19. Murray Fredericks, *Salt 9*, 2006

To conclude, I have studied the formal approaches taken by various contemporary photographers. Collectively these approaches pare the picture plane down to the simple elements of foreground, horizon and background. These approaches maintain the landscape convention as exemplified by the van Goyen while exploring various levels of reduction.

Chapter Two – The Phenomenology of the Practice

This project explores the nexus of relations between landscape as a place, (considered as the predominantly natural environment) and landscape as a picture, as an image or representation of the same physical, analogue environment. Given how landscape as a term, crosses over between natural and cultural definitions, I consider “landscape” an appropriate conceptual vehicle to explore the translation from the visual world in front of the lens to an image based presentation.

The early origins of the word landscape are found in the Danish *landskab*, the German *landschaft*, and Old English *landscipe*. Anne Whiston Spirn traces the etymology of landscape as a combination of land, (with land originally meaning the physical environment and people) ‘with the various suffixes, ‘skab’, ‘schaft’ and ‘scipe’ referring to shaping and partnership’ (Whiston Spirn 2008, p. 54). Isis Brook agrees; the German *landschaft* in denoting an area of cultivation and habitation maintains a sense of cultural participation and connection with nature, ‘as lived in rather than simply as viewed’ (Brook 2013, p. 109).

Landschaft as the lived experience of place gave way to a coupling of land with looking which emphasises vision above or in excess of other sense modalities. Thus the contemporary definition reads as: ‘a view or prospect of rural scenery, more or less extensive, such as is comprehended with the scope or range of vision from a single point of view’ and ‘a picture representing natural inland or coastal scenery’ (Macquarie Dictionary, 5th Edition, 2009). The contemporary definition results from a cultural shift; direct experience became less central to the concept as mapping and painting evolved

into a privileging of the visual aspects of landscape engagement (Waenerberg 2008, p. 23).

The concept of landscape is commonly correlated with a distanced, objectifying Cartesian viewpoint where both artist and viewer engage ‘the landscape from positions of power’ (Hawkins 2013, p. 191). The problem with the term landscape as Jeff Malpas articulates it is a position where “landscape” is considered ‘as essentially a product of a representational construal of our relation to the world’, where the viewer is conflated with the spectator (Malpas 2011, p. 6). Whereas, the viewer engaged by the scene or artwork, enters a relation of reciprocal exchange. In my estimation, reciprocal exchange is either significantly lessened or totally absent from a spectatorial encounter.

My conjecture is that the issue of conflating the viewer with the spectator is an ideological position which problematises landscape while negating experiential relations between viewers and views. This project aims to address the above critique; by means of a phenomenological study of the relations between the viewer and the view. My intention is to amplify commonalities between the perceptual experience of natural environments and the perceptual experience of pictorial images.

The contemporary definition of landscape denotes an area in front of the viewer, such as the perspective from a scenic viewing platform. Although there is not necessarily any barrier to a person moving and physically exploring the environment further, the emphasis is on the singular and stationary figure, the person who stands and looks out at the scene in front of them. The contemporary definition, for all its shortcomings,

includes the visual field that surrounds the body, from the nearby environment to the distance.

Thus the contemporary definition of landscape preserves the everyday experience of the natural environment as contextualised by proximity, distance and the horizon. A study of proximity and distance is relevant to this enquiry precisely because the relations between proximity and distance are integral to our everyday embodied relation to the world around us. This circumstance is so ontologically basic that it can be said to structure perception.

Proximity, distance and the horizon are foundational to the pictorial tradition of representing landscapes in painting and photography. As previously stated, I am concerned with the translation of “the real world”, the world in front of the camera lens, to the resulting image. I am working with the pictorial conventions of landscape representation such as foreground, background and horizon. My images are constructed, in part, by the landscape convention. However, rather than operating as an empty trope, the foreground/background convention is purposefully engaged as an approach that amplifies spatial relations. I work with atmospheric perspective (salient and recessive lights or darks) to accentuate the illusion of depth. My purpose is not to create an imagistic illusion of empiric distance but to work with *subtle levels of depth*.

Two themes in common with the wider field of landscape research are relevant. The first explores the significance of landscape as the foundational experience of self to the world, as argued by Berleant 2012, p. 77 and Dubow 2008, p.104. I propose that the

foundational and universal relation, based on perceptual experience of the everyday physical world, is changing. Given our everyday interaction with virtual, screen based worlds our attention is continually diverted away from our immediate environment. My response is to give my full attention to my surrounding physical environment.

The photographic practice guides and structures this intention. The question here is; what moves between the place and the viewer? This question is a rephrasing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty when he states the ‘problem is to understand these strange relationships which are woven between the parts of the landscape, or between it and me as an incarnate subject’ (Merleau-Ponty 2000, p. 61).

The second theme explores the term landscape in both its modes, as place and as pictures of places, specifically exploring the transistion between reality and representations of reality, as put forward by Hawkins 2013, p. 190 and Wattchow 2013, pp. 88-89. Questions pertinent to this theme are: what has translated from the natural environment to the image? What has translated that may include but is not limited to visual appearance? How might photographic images eschew pictorial representation as a form of objectification and yet remain actual and true to the world in front of the camera lens? In what manner are the resulting photographs evidential?

My project is concerned with the relationship between the self (the one who is looking) and landscape (as that which is seen). An expanded concept of landscape is utilised to trace multiple relationships ‘distant or intimate’ (Wylie 2013, p. 55) between the viewer and the environing world. The method aims to allow aspects of the visual, the

experiential appearing of the world, in excess of representational content, to come to the fore. Exploring, as Harriet Hawkins puts it, how landscape in both of its modes, as place and as pictures of places ‘opens us up to a range of ways of seeing and sensing’ (Hawkins 2013, p. 191). This project, accordingly, privileges the stationary viewer in-relation-to the distinctly visual aspects of landscape.

Landscape/place

This study conceptualises landscape/place as a matrix of interdependent relationships: personal, individual, autobiographical, felt, sensed, affective, physical, embodied and sensual and privileges landscape as a relational endeavour negotiated between persons and environments. Reprising the earlier term *landschaft* places less emphasis on location or site and more on the process of exchange between people and environments. The concept of place contextualises the cultural activity of engaging with the natural environment. Thus landscape can be redefined as a loosely bounded area that includes the natural forms and physical terrain and the participatory interactions of people with the land.

Accordingly, Brooke (2013, p. 109), defines landscape as an exchange between natural and cultural agencies. Like Brooke, I am exploring landscape as a porous term that resists tight definitions and spills outwards in all directions including and assimilating into its purview concepts of world, cosmos, space, time and history. I am also exploring how landscape spills inwards, proving itself to be the interstice between physical, material emplacement and embodied experiencing consciousness.

My intention is to amplify concrete yet subtle aspects of the everyday perceptual experience of landscape. De-emphasising the scene as it appears to the naked eye allows these subtle nuances to come forward, in an evidential or appearing manner. Gunter Figal describes the standing back that allows a coming forward as ‘the release that is essential to the place’ (Figal 2010, p. 189). Figal describes ‘that which shows itself in a place as the *phenomenally given*’ (Figal 2010, p. 189) and makes the distinction that the correspondence between the phenomenally giving and given ‘belong to a relation that is only possible as a spatial one’ (Figal 2010, p. 189).

My conjecture is that Figal’s relation between *giving and given* can be loosely aligned with the relation between *appearing and appearance* in regarding both places and images. The giving, appearing aspect could be thought of as an excess experienced in-relation-to the envioning world. The subtle distinction and the interplay between the two sets of terms are significant here. My intention has been to explore how images could be experienced as phenomenally giving in a similar manner to places (continually overflowing and overreaching any attempt to confine, name, possess or represent). My aim, therefore, is to enable the phenomenally giving and appearing aspect of the relation to landscape to be made experiential. My strategy to achieve this aim is to amplify a subtle yet dynamic spatial engagement between the viewer and the image.

Landscape and embodiment

All experience is culturally mediated by age, gender, race, and life experience. However, the relationship between the natural environment and the body is foundational and prior. As Wesley Kort states, ‘[n]atural space is a reminder of the relatively late

arrival and derivative standing of humanly constructed spaces' (Kort 2011, p. 39).

Therefore, an enquiry into landscape does not progress very far before the body asserts its presence as the perspective from which the landscape is perceived.

Our physical bodies are always sited and located, and this circumstance is so basic as to be commonly ignored in everyday experience. The body's relationship to the land is so ubiquitously present that it commonly flies under the radar of conscious awareness, forming the background to everyday consciousness. However, from the perspective of phenomenological practice, it is impossible to exclude the body from consideration as it becomes apparent that landscape, as Edward Casey argues, is more or less the 'coherent setting of an embodied point of view' (Casey 2002, p. xv).

I consider awareness of physical contact between the body and the environment, affords access to the ground of confluence between the self and the world. The body is both crucial and integral to landscape experience, in that our access to landscape is by means of or through bodily awareness. The body is the point of physical contact with the wider world, (or more accurately the body is the site of multiple points of contact). Bernadette Wegenstein describes embodiment as 'how particular subjects live and experience being a body dynamically, in specific, concrete ways' (Wegenstein 2010, p. 20). Embodiment is therefore, experiential, personal and intimate when understood as *being* rather than having a body.

Phenomenological enquiry leads to a dissolving of what can appear as distinct boundaries between the body and the environment. Consider how Maurice Merleau-

Ponty's term "flesh", introduced in his last work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, recasts the body as the locale of exchange between self and the world. Merleau-Ponty's "flesh" correlates 'the body and the world through a primordial reciprocity' (Wegenstein 2010, p. 26). Abram follows Merleau-Ponty in attending to the body from an experiential perspective, finding it 'difficult to discern, at any moment, precisely where this living body begins and where it ends' (Abram 1997, pp. 46-47). Abram describes the physical boundaries of the body as 'more like membranes than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange' (Abram 1997, p. 46).

The body can be apprehended from two mutually inclusive perspectives; externally or objectively and internally or subjectively. I can see my body from the outside, and I can experience my body from the inside. The same can be said of our experience of the natural environment because the landscape is not the external environment but the understanding that there is no access to an environmental circumstance separate from embodied consciousness.

Dorothee Legrand situates awareness of the located body as the primary 'manner of being conscious of oneself as open to one's world' (Legrand 2012, p. 289). According to Legrand, openness to the world is orientated by movement in two directions, from the world to the self and from the self to the world, as Legrand puts it, 'centrifugally reaching-out (of oneself) and centripetally being-indicated-by (the world)' (Legrand 2012, p. 289). The approach of this project works with an attitude of curiosity and interest toward that which one is not, and this process starts with attentively orientating

one's awareness towards the world while maintaining awareness of one's physical body.

Looking and experience

Hanne Jacobs writes that the phenomenological method involves attending to the appearance of the world, describing as best as one can, how the world shows up from a first-person perspective (Jacobs 2013, pp. 353-54). My experience of the environment and the viewer's experience of the resulting images connect through the activity of looking. At first glance this statement is superlatively obvious; however, it is crucial to the method and the results of the project, as it is precisely the experiential activity of looking that connects the phenomenological approach of the practice and the viewer's encounter with the images.

For this study, I have set up a glass bowl filled with water, on top of a stool, on top of an old card table in my front yard. I situate the bowl of water in physical proximity and relation to the outlook, and I position the camera lens close to the front edge of the bowl. The camera functions as a viewing device before it functions as an image capture device. I use the camera to look, and I look with the aid of the camera. I am looking with the aid of the whole arrangement (glass bowl of water, reflective surface, surrounding environment, evening light and camera). I am working with this entire apparatus as a tool for visual investigation.

Consistent framing across the duration of the project contributes to the construction of this experiential viewing circumstance; I am looking with and through this formal

structure. While looking through the viewfinder, I close my left eye, which removes all peripheral vision from that side, so that my visual field consists of the rectangular shape of the image frame surrounded by darkness. I am describing a restricted mode of visual access; which I correlate with Mary Price's description of the photograph as 'a strange, confined space' (Price 1994).

What I can see through the viewfinder is a scene; constructed in part by the world in front of the lens, in part by the camera's design and construction, and in part by my decisions concerning how to adjust and operate the camera. For instance, I intentionally soften the background and confine focus to the foreground, and I frame the scene so that the reflective surface of water comprises the lower third to a fifth and the surrounding environment comprises the remainder of the image plane.

I work with a soft focus to purposefully limit and filter aspects of the visual field; the background is sieved so that what remains are specific attributes of light and colour. The narrowness of this approach necessarily leaves out vast amounts of information on one hand and on the other functions to amplify and intensify aspects of the visual field. Reducing the translation of literal appearance, the visual world as it appears to the naked eye, is a strategy to bring aspects of experience to the fore that are otherwise overwhelmed in the apprehension of familiar, recognisable information.

With these consistent parameters in place, I am looking at water and sky, proximity and distance, foreground and background, with either a sharply or softly defined horizon (fictitiously inferred by the far edge of the surface of water risen above the rim of the

bowl). Working with the camera on a tripod tightens this already consistent approach. As I am working subtle, nuanced shifts in colour temperature, intensity of light, form and movement are revealed from one image to another image. The revealment of subtle shifts becomes apparent against and because of the consistent composition. Working handheld results in greater compositional variation across images gathered from one evening's session, produced by varying degrees of camera height and tilt relative to the reflective surface of water. Whether I am working hand-held or with a tripod, the major variables are the weather and lighting conditions which change during an evening, day to day, and season to season. Another variable is the sun setting incrementally further south in summer and north in winter.

The surface of water is sensitive and responsive to any changes in air flow. When there is no breeze, the water is a mirror-like surface. Occasionally I purposefully agitate the surface by pouring in more water, blowing across the surface of water or tapping the glass.

Still surface (excerpt from journal)

Extraordinarily still evening - not a breath of wind. I work with the far edge of the glass bowl as a horizon line, finding its sharpest aspect, delineated by lights and darks above and below. Continually framing the line, concentrating on the line, then framing the lower third section, the water, and leaving the background to its own devices. Reviewing the images on the LCD screen at the back of the

camera as I work and then framing to include and consider the background cloud forms.

I am continually moving between looking at what is in front of me (above and behind) and looking through the viewfinder. Looking at the scene as it is to the naked eye and through the combined camera lens, shallow depth of field and the reflective surface mirroring the light from above.

The scene transforms; the “all out there” is concentrated into a window and concentrated again into the reflective surface. Squeezed and made sharper, sieved and refined. Enveloped and enveloping concentrations of light - and that excruciating edge.

Turbulent surface (excerpt from journal)

A south-westerly weather front and an aperture forms in the distant portion of an otherwise overcast sky, and the light in that portion of the sky reflects on the surface of the water in the bowl in front of me. It is as if I am immersed and surrounded by bright, illuminated threads, skeins and ropes of light. My aim is to photograph the translation of light from the sky to the reflective surface of water. All my effort is in finding the angle, tilt, height and focus that most accurately reveal subtle, shifting appearances and manifestations of light and at the same time I am gently probing my affective response; asking ‘what is this, what is this, what is this?’

Looking/concentration and absorption

The photographic practice that I am describing explores looking as an active engagement with the visual field. I spend most of my time as a photographer, not taking pictures, but absorbed in the experience of looking. This approach structures the experience of looking differently to everyday visual perception. As I work, I find myself immersed in an experience, similar to Elaine Scarry's (1999, p. 13) notion that how 'one walks through the world, the endless small adjustments of balance, is affected by the shifting weights of small beautiful things'. I often experience an internal shift in an otherwise habitual stance or attitude: something opens in me, I am stopped in my tracks; I experience an *arrestment*. What I am most keenly aware of, not always, but often enough to be worth mentioning, are feelings of fragility and vulnerability, a non-specific sadness or sadness without an object or reason to feel sad and in between the sad feelings pervasively warm feelings of care.

On occasions when looking away from the viewfinder and looking up into the sky, I feel pierced by the subtlety of the light, and the acute sharpness of this feeling floors me. There is something about this concentrated style of looking, the framing, the containment of a small portion of sky and then moving between that tunnel of absorption and looking out towards the bay, out towards distant landforms or at the sky above me: I become keenly aware of the sky as porous, open and tender. It is as if the visual world has intensified and has flooded my awareness. I presume this experience has something to do with transitioning from a contracted to a comparatively open viewing experience and something to do with giving my full attention to my first-hand experience of the appearing world.

What I have been attempting to do is to investigate what I take to be basic to being human; my embedding in a world that overflows and overreaches my capacity to grasp, understand or know. The images are constructed so that they simultaneously explore and model experience, mediating between proximity and distance: between knowing and not knowing. Not knowing fuels the project, not to know more, but to open to curiosity and interest. What have I discovered? I cannot point to it, exactly, I cannot pin it down at all, the feeling is elusive and shifting. However, this sense of being dumbfounded feels like a moral good, although I cannot figure out why that might be the case. I cannot argue that such experience makes me a better person or improves otherwise self-serving behaviours or attitudes. There is no ethical imperative, yet something in this style of looking feels inherently valuable.

Amidst the experience of nothing particularly identifiable, occasionally a strong feeling rises like a definitive “what is at stake”. I can best describe this feeling as an unalienable right to freedom, similar to the idea that one has a right to nationhood and citizenship based on the land of one’s birth. The “right of soil”, *jus soli* is a right that has endured. I am thinking of *jus soli* as a relation between self and world: as the right to belong to the world or more accurately as the relation of belonging-to-the-world. I am identifying this relation as important for the future — as a valuable relation to be carried forward.

I would like to bring the above suggestion of belonging-to-the-world loosely together with, what Figal, following Kant, describes as a type of mental freedom associated with beauty. Figal suggests that beauty stimulates cognitive free play. The beautiful

experience is not finite; beauty cannot be extracted from its experiential context, the experience of beauty is, however, ‘intense’, ‘heightened’ and an experience which remains open and in play. As Figal notes, such experience does not result in a determinate knowing but keeps the cognitive faculties ‘apart and at the same time allows them to be related to each other’ (Figal 2010, p. 46).

In conclusion, my elusive feelings that are difficult to describe are unlikely to be made available to the viewer, and my aim is not to transfer the specific content of my feelings to the images. I am interested in how the work might conjure the opening of an atmospheric space, where beauty and affect support a dynamic sympathetic relationship between the viewer and the artwork. I am interested in how this space might function as a model of relational engagement. I am aiming to make this model of aesthetic engagement apparent and evidential in the resulting images.

Chapter Three - Aura

This chapter gives an account of what Diarmuid Costello (2005) in ‘Aura, Face, Photography : re-reading Benjamin today’, describes as Benjamin’s ‘mature conception of aura’ (Costello 2005, p. 166). In Part One I discuss aura in regards to experience and with regards to the autonomous stature of nature and artworks. My intention is first, to connect Benjamin’s mature philosophical concept of aura and the autonomous stature of artworks with the structure of perceptual experience and second to highlight, as Benjamin does, the refrain of “what is at stake” regarding how we collectively experience and achieve access to the world.

In Part Two, I connect the experiential, relational aspects of aura with the phenomenological approach of this study. I suggest the surfacing of involuntary memories and the exact yet fleeting and momentary instances of affect and beauty contribute to the sensing of auratic atmospheres. In a reciprocal fashion, I propose that auratic atmospheres are composed, in part, of and by somatically registered sensations. I describe atmosphere as contributing to the matrix of auratic relations, suggesting, therefore, that an artwork’s aura and atmosphere are co-implicated and co-extensive.

Part One – Walter Benjamin’s Aura

Benjamin in his influential essay, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (first published in 1936) writes, ‘that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art’ (Benjamin 1969, p. 221). Costello contests the reductive uses Benjamin’s essay has been put to by cultural theory.

Specifically, readings which claim Benjamin is celebrating the loss of aura from contemporary experience (Costello 2005, p. 165).

Costello's discussion incorporates Benjamin's references to aura in 'Little History of Photography' and the later 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', first published in 1931 and 1939 respectively. Costello argues that Benjamin's stance towards aura is not clear cut but equivocal and at times paradoxical (Costello 2005, p. 166) given that Benjamin conceptualised aura in two distinct forms. The first related directly to the reproductive technologies of photography and cinema and the second to 'the *structure* of perception' (Costello 2005, p. 167) and subjective first-person experience more generally. Costello argues that Benjamin is concerned with the decline of the second category of aura; as 'a fundamental category of experience, memory, and perception permeating human possibilities of encountering the world, other persons and works of art' (Costello 2005, p. 165).

Miriam Hansen in 'Benjamin's Aura', upholds Costello's position, stating that aura names 'the most precious facet ... of experience' (Hansen 2008, p. 338). Hansen equates aura with Benjamin's long term project to reconceptualise experience and to 'reactivate older potentials of perception' (Hansen 2008, p. 338). Hansen further elevates the value Benjamin attributes to aura, suggesting that Benjamin smuggled aura into the intellectual arena (at the time aura was highly disregarded by the dominant Marxist discourse) to ensure the survival of the concept as an aesthetic, philosophical category. According to Hansen the only way to make aura palatable was to thematise aura as phenomena in decline (Hansen 2008, p. 338). The perspective that Benjamin

champions the decline of aura is disputed by Costello and recast by Hansen as a strategic gamble to support the survival of aura, as an aesthetic category, into the future.

As Howard Caygill notes, Benjamin explored ‘the matrix of the theoretical relations between art, aura, magic and technology’ (Caygill 1998, p. 97), connecting changes in perceptual experience brought about by the shifting interface between culture, nature and technology with shifts in the production and reception of artworks. According to Caygill, what Benjamin considered as the fate of art ‘is symptomatic of a fundamental change in the structure of experience which may be traced back to broader political and technical developments’ (Caygill 1998, p. 97).

Benjamin comments on the demise of every day, analogue relationships based on physical proximity. For instance, the impact of photography on the relationship between an artwork and a viewer or the cinema on the relationship between an actor and the audience (Benjamin 1969, p. 221). Consequently, an artwork's physical proximity, its ‘presence in time and space’ (1969, p. 220) is replaced by virtual proximity. The capacity of technologies such as the internet to deliver facsimiles of the world to us, in the comfort of our homes, has undoubtedly increased in recent years and most likely will continue to grow. My aim here is not to pursue a critique of technology but to counteract what Val Plumwood identifies as post-enlightenment thinking's capacity to devalue and undermine ‘the particular and immediate, the bodily, the sensory, the experiential and the emotional’ (Plumwood 2002, p. 231).

Benjamin describes how in adjusting to urban life, the collective consciousness of his day was alert to and monitoring the environment; either deflecting or absorbing a variety of constant minor confrontations. He argued that the city requires a different kind of sensory awareness comparative to rural living and suggests that the speed and tempo of editing (with reference to Russian cinema) acclimatised people to an otherwise overwhelming series of physiological and psychological shocks (Costello 2005, p. 176).

Benjamin further argued that the culturally shared experience of time was effectively “chopped up” into syncopated flashes and experience was therefore commonly confined to a series of present moments lacking inherent narrative continuum from the past to the future. Costello (2005, p. 175) describes how for the modern person, there is no anchoring of experience, and contemporary reality is lived as a play of beguiling, attractive, and essentially vacuous surfaces. Benjamin identifies disruption to the translation of tradition, from the past to the future; arguing this disruption interferes with the form and not only the content of cultural knowledge.

Hansen (2008, p. 339) aligns tradition with aura, noting both are vulnerable to the conditions of a technologically mediated culture, therefore, both are at risk of disappearing from human experience. Benjamin, Costello and Hansen argue that the traditional form of cultural knowledge, the structural basis of perceptual experience grounded in the physical, analogue world, is changing. This “world” cannot literally disappear, but it can move further into the background of everyday awareness.

Benjamin famously stated that ‘mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual’ (Benjamin 1969, p. 224) and with this shift, ‘the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever’ (Benjamin 1969, p. 226). George Markus in ‘Benjamin’s Critique of Aesthetic Autonomy’, writes that Benjamin’s influential contribution to cultural theory is characterised by his ‘rejection of the idea of the autonomy of art’ (Markus 2009, p. 111). Markus’s argument, however, revises Benjamin’s account of the autonomous stature of artworks, just as Costello’s argument revises the account of aura that has dominated cultural theory since the mid 1970’s.

Markus points out that whereas Benjamin’s contemporary, Theodor Adorno emphasised the loss of the individual’s autonomy, Benjamin emphasised the loss of access to a shared, communal tradition as impacting negatively on the structure of perception and therefore on experience (2009, p. 112). Benjamin and Adorno, however, agree, that with the demise of aura there is a loss of relational intimacy: between people and objects, people and other people and people and places. A type of relational intimacy where subjective experience and the objective world are integrated, while the autonomy and distance of the world are maintained and preserved.

Costello argues that with the disappearance of aura, our individual and shared cultural capacity to acknowledge the autonomous status of our world, by perceiving and respecting ‘the uniqueness, difference or distance of *any* object of experience’ (Costello 2005, p. 177) is disappearing. The question that Benjamin posed in the mid 1930’s before and in anticipation of future shifts in experience and perception was: what effect does the thrust of capitalism, as manifest in the consumption of reproductive

technologies, have on our relationships with self, with others and with our world? I am proposing that the status of nature, as autonomous, as other and as hauntingly inaccessible, has become increasingly rare in contemporary experience. My question is; how does the loss of aura affect the structure of perceptual experience in regarding the physically surrounding, analogue environment generally and the natural environment specifically?

Markus sums up Benjamin's refrain of "what is at stake" as 'the complete loss of intersubjective understanding and of the capacity to live in the world as one's own home' (Markus 2009, p. 113). He summarises the thrust of Benjamin's whole oeuvre, in positive form, as aiming for a cultural revolution so that the commodity status of natural resources and experiences are replaced by the ground of 'genuine inter-play between such a collectivity, on the one hand, and autonomous nature, on the other' (Markus 2009, pp. 126-127). Markus names this revolutionary process as awakening and claims the process of awakening is 'only possible because there are hidden correspondences between humans and nature, independent of all human intervention' (Markus 2009, p. 125). According to Markus, Benjamin positively endorsed the idea that human beings belong to the world and what was at stake for Benjamin, with the loss of aura is the loss of a mode of perception that we could regard as our *receptive openness* to the world — despite the distance of the world.

Aura and the returned gaze

Costello contends that aura opens the subject to a particular kind of (subjective) experience in regarding the world. Aura is less a quality belonging to the object of

perception and more a capacity on behalf of the perceiving subject (Costello 2005, p. 167). Costello describes a circumstance in which perceptual objects become subjects, specifically when they seem to look towards us ‘as an agency or intelligence or point of view *onto* that world, and hence from outside it’ (Costello 2005, p. 181). The capacity of the perceptual object to return the gaze resides in our capacity, as subjects, to apprehend the perceptual object as a subject in its own right. Figal agrees that ‘aura rests upon the fact that the gaze ... is returned’ (Figal 2010, p. 211).

Costello describes how artworks are commonly credited ‘with the ability to *look back* at us’ (Costello 2005, p. 165) and ‘to exhibit a subjectivity of their own, a subjectivity capable of putting us in question’ (Costello 2005, p. 177). Benjamin says of the figures depicted in early photography, ‘(t)here was an aura about them, a medium that lent fullness and security to their gaze’ (Benjamin 1999, p. 515). Here Benjamin links aura specifically to the human face, as does Costello, however, I would contend that the verification of a human agent that is looking, is less important than the sensed awareness of being the subject of another's gaze. A sensing of vision that flies back and forth between the viewer and the visual object resonates with James Elkins description of objects that have ‘a certain way of resisting or accepting my look and returning that look to me’ (Elkins 1996, p. 70).

Aura and the self/word relation

Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* connects aura and the autonomous stature of artworks with a process of self-questioning in which the enclosing boundaries of an interior self, the subjective self, dissolve revealing the confinement of this position (Adorno 1997, p.

269). According to Adorno, auratic experience impacts directly upon and undermines the foundations of personal identity. Costello confers; aura is a somewhat discombobulating experience, often apprehended as a direct challenge to habitual modes of perception (Costello 2005, p. 181). Two things are happening simultaneously; auratic experience undermines our everyday sense of separation from the world (Costello 2005, p. 181) *and* disrupts our sense of personal identity. In Adorno's vocabulary there is a distinct shudder and in my vocabulary an arrestment.

Hans Ulbrich Gumbrecht describes how to challenge the constructs of self-identity and enact a reversal of what can otherwise be a common relationship; between the self (considered as internal) and the world (considered as external). Gumbrecht (2004, p. 137) describes:

pushing an initial relationship, a given situation of distance ... by singling out ... strong individual feelings of joy or of sadness - and by concentrating on them, with our bodies and our minds; by letting them push the distance between us (the subject) and the world (the object) up to a point where the distance may suddenly turn into an unmediated state of being—in—the—world.

Gumbrecht describes applying pressure on a relationship of distance, such as the assumed exteriority of the perceptual object/the world and simultaneously probing one's subjective, interior experience. He describes a movement, an opening of the self towards the world, precisely by interrogating one's subjective relationship with the world. The approach of this study involves suspending the attitude that one is confident

in one's relation with the world from a position of knowing so that confidence is replaced by a constant, probing question to the world: *what is this?*

Auratic experience makes explicit the notion that the world exists for its self and not for us and brings this home experientially rather than conceptually. According to Costello, aura is experienced as immersion in an 'object that retains its distance despite that immersion' (Costello 2005, p. 173). Costello describes how auratic experience preserves a palpable level of opacity, as a barrier, a limit or an edge (Costello 2005, p. 173). Figal agrees; aura 'affects one from a distance and in that distance ... one is no longer master of the situation' (Figal 2010, p. 212). Thus, auratic distance can be characterised as unapproachable and inaccessible but not indifferent. The world maintains an impenetrable reserve, and yet this experience occurs in a circumstance that is immersive, intimate and affecting. This circumstance describes the paradox of being simultaneously embedded in and differentiated from the world; of being both apart from and a part of the world—cosmos—universe.

Aura and the artwork/viewer relation

Artworks can function as models for our relationships with the larger and more complicated world that enable us to see or experience aspects of our being-in-the-world more clearly. Artist Gregg Bordowitz claims that the purpose of art 'is to return the viewer to herself or himself estranged - feeling strange and feeling the world as a strange unfamiliar place' (Bordowitz 2009, p. 159). Bordowitz links this discombobulating experience to the autonomous stature of the artwork, its otherness. In such an encounter, the viewer's subjective experience is not upheld or affirmed by the

artwork. Rather than the onus being on the work to provide the viewer with experience; the work asks that the viewer completes the work as Adorno suggests, according to the artworks' internal logic (Adorno 1997, p. 275).

Adorno describes how an artwork surpasses the subjectivity of the viewer by asserting its independent stature, by refusing 'to function as a container for the psychology of the spectator' (Adorno 1997, p. 275). Auratic experience counters a stance towards the world where artworks and perceptual objects, in general, are judged and valued according to their usefulness, their capacity to respond to individual preferences and to provide self-identity affirming experiences (Adorno 1997, p. 275). Auratic artworks oppose the circumstance, where, as Heidegger says, the artwork is in danger of being reduced 'to the role of a mere stimulant to experience' (Heidegger 2002, p. 41).

Aura and the world/artwork relation

Adorno argues that the autonomous stature of the artwork, its distance, is activated when it maintains a level of reserve and inaccessibility (Adorno 1997, p. 275).

Therefore, sensing of the agency of the other is imperative to acknowledging its independent presence. According to Adorno's thesis, the autonomous stature of the work connects directly and intimately to the artworks truth content. Artworks, as independent agencies 'fulfill their truth better the more they fulfill themselves: This is the Ariadnian thread by which they feel their way through their inner darkness' (Adorno 1997, pp. 282-283).

Adorno (1997, p. 274) defines aura as:

that whereby the nexus of the artwork's elements points beyond this nexus and allows each individual element to point beyond itself ... this auratic element has its model in nature, and the artwork is more deeply related to nature in this element than in any other factual similarity to nature.

My intention is to explore how an artwork maintains a relationship to its truth content, independently of and in excess of either artist or viewer, via its relation to the world. Figal discusses Heidegger's 'understanding of truth as unconcealment' (Figal 2010, p. 84) and in agreement with this thesis my purpose is to enable the self-showing of the work to stand forward. If the truth content of the work is evidential, it is evidential in the manner that this aspect of the work stands for itself and *steps forward*.

Adorno suggests that what in effect, gives the viewer entry or access to the truth content of the artwork is the 'promise that the content is real' (Adorno 1997, p. 277). Truth and reality have a specific connection to the structure of perception and vice versa. My proposition is that truth and reality have a specific relationship with how distance and autonomy are operating in the perceptual, structural foundations of auratic experience.

I am not talking about factual knowledge, and I am struggling to communicate this point in words. However, I would like to suggest that sympathy or affinity between the truth content of the work and the viewer can be an affecting experience. In my experience, while I am working, there is a sensing of my relation to the world, which is groundless,

vast, empty, unknown and real. The sense of this *real—for—me* is at the nub of my experience as I am immersed in the practice.

Benjamin notes the decline of experience that is inherently questioning and open to alterity and distance with its replacement by an increased facility to catalogue, name, own, possess and reproduce reality. Benjamin claims the modern masses desire ‘to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly’ (Benjamin 1969, p. 223) is fulfilled by technologies that deliver ‘an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction’ (Benjamin 1969, p. 223).

Technologies by enabling virtual proximity also make the world more palatable, commodifiable and consumable, delivering certainty in exchange for the uncomfortable, unknown qualities of distance. Costello argues that technology brings the world virtually closer and at the same time inculcates ‘an intolerance of distance and uniqueness’ (Costello 2005, p. 174). Figal agrees; we no longer allow ourselves to ‘be drawn into distance’ (Figal 2010, p. 213). Whereas, aura activates our capacity, individually and collectively to experience and respect distance and difference; acknowledging others as agents that are not fully transparent or available to us (Costello 2005, p. 177). Abram expands the theme; the ethical dimension of aura opens to an awareness of a shared and collective field of experience, as it is lived by various sensing subjects (1996, p. 38).

In conclusion, Benjamin quite clearly defines aura as structural in regarding perceptual experience and therefore fundamental to the self/world relation (Costello 2005, p. 168).

I am defining aura as the medium that preserves the unknowable, ungraspable quality of experience. I have described aura as experiential in-relation-to an external and autonomous “object”, the world, which despite physical proximity, retains a distance and ‘a perceived inapproachability’ (Markus 2009, p. 119). I propose that auratic experience is uniquely personal and deeply intimate between the self and the world; overcoming solipsism as an otherwise dominating and suffocating subjectivity.

Thus, aura opens between the self and the world, the artwork and the viewer to a confrontation with distance that is simultaneously challenging and inherently affecting. Experiences of reconciliation or integration are not goals or endpoints, and the experience of extended and open enquiry is typically incomplete.

Part Two

Aura - a strange weave of space and time

Having discussed aura as a philosophical concept, determined by relations between proximity and distance, I will now explore how aura is relevant to my photographic practice and the images resulting from this experiential practice.

Benjamin explored what he regarded as a shift in the structure of perception and identified what was at stake given this shift and he positions aura as central to the translation of tradition and the autonomous stature of artworks, however, when he wants to define aura he turns to the natural environment as the originating source:

[t]he concept of aura which was proposed above with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch (Benjamin 1969, pp. 222-223).

In an expanded version found in the earlier 'Little History of Photography', the same statement reads as follows:

[w]hat is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance - this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch (Benjamin 1999, pp. 518-19).

In both extracts, Benjamin describes a mode of conscious receptivity and physical passivity, such as when lying down, outside in the sun and the eye wanders and rests and thoughts well up. The body is still; this is a body at rest, supine in a backyard, a park, a riverbank. Benjamin describes a type of relaxed concentration, a porous receptivity, a circumstance of personal safety. The body is now a body in place, and the place, the natural environment, is no longer backgrounded or held at bay. The circumstance subtended by reverie is an 'ordinary happening in which the world itself opens to us' (Malpas 2016, p. 14). It is as if, aspects of the natural environment subtly move forward, pressing upon and permeating boundaries, as if distance contracts and awareness expands: and one can breathe the aura of distant mountains.

I propose that the foundations of auratic experience are concentration, focus and immersion in the immediately apparent, surrounding environment. When a subject gives their attention to their immediate and surrounding physical environment, through attentive awareness of sight, sound, temperature and touch they are also attentive to

their emplaced body. Attentiveness to place is attentiveness to emplacement, the manner in which the body intersects the world. This simple fact of existence combined with receptivity and psychological openness (Costello 2005, p. 173) opens the sensing subject to and amplifies awareness of the possibility and potentiality of each living moment. Or as Figal states; ‘the possibility of life is recognised in each instance in the way that it realizes itself in space and thus determines space’ (Figal 2010, p. 219). Thus auratic experience, ‘the spatiality of the absolute here’ (Figal 2010, p. 219) is always experientially available and accessible.

I have been attempting to explore the perceptual correlation between proximity and distance, so as to investigate spatial relations that are so basic as to form the ground underlying everyday consciousness. Spatial relations are not only the self-evident everyday state of affairs but the very basis of perception. Spatial relations appear as if constitutive of consciousness, given that every conscious moment stands forth from a background. As Figal explains, the perceptual object ‘stands out from the background ... and yet still belongs within this background’ (Figal 2010, p. 176).

Bryan Bannon suggests giving more attention to the ambient aspects of perceptual experience, such that by ‘drawing the ambient background to the fore, our situatedness within a network of relations becomes increasingly apparent’ (Bannon 2001, p. 424). I would like to suggest the images resulting from the photographic project model Bannon’s premise, given the foreground is the magnified, amplified and intensified mirrored equivalent of the background. The foreground remains connected to the background and yet is distinct from, and stands forward from the background.

Aura and atmosphere

Every geographical location has an atmosphere, its unique sense of the time of a place. The atmosphere is commonly associated with participatory and engaged immersive experiences of the surrounding and enveloping experience of place (Pallasma 2015, p. 133) and is associated both with immersion, a sense of being inside and a sense of externalisation; of vast, wide, open space; of infinite distance. Atmospheres are fluid transitory mediums, such as the complexity of the weather-world (Ingold 2007, p. S22).

Atmospheres are closely aligned with experiencing the sky, land or seascape as a spacious openness, as an experience of circumambience, as Casey describes an experience of being ‘continually encompassed and exceeded’ (Casey 2002, p. 8). Atmospheres are dynamic processes, and in moving, they imply duration. I am proposing that the atmosphere of the work contributes to the overall sensing of the aura of the work; conceived as reciprocal and relational *aesthetic engagement* between viewer and work.

Aura and atmosphere are closely linked given the similar associations with breeze, wind, air, exhalation and breath. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines aura as: ‘[a] gentle breeze, a zephyr ... [a] subtle emanation or exhalation from any substance ... [e]lectrical atmosphere’. Aura, like atmosphere, connects to the activity of respiration, the muscular contraction and expansion of the lungs, the rhythmic drawing in and expelling of air. A study of auratic atmospheres, like a study of breath, blurs but does not dissolve the boundary of distinct edges of containment between self and world, viewer and artwork.

I am thinking of an artwork's atmosphere as the matrix in which the more precise and exact auratic instances are registered. I would like to propose that an artwork's atmosphere is constituted by a process of perceptually fluid, spatial relations, in play between the viewer and the work.

Involuntary memory

Hansen describes involuntary memory or *mémoire involontaire*, as a concept Benjamin borrowed from Proust, denoting memories laid down through unconscious accretion (Hansen 2008, p. 334). Involuntary memory is the store of memory that is neither consciously constructed, nor available to conscious reflection and retrieval, surfacing as the embodied memory of angles, weights, temperature, pressure and movement. Somatic or bodily held memories can well up in response to physical triggers such as smells (Benjamin 1969, p. 184), often releasing in their wake a cascade of mental associations and autobiographical memories.

For involuntary memories to surface to the level of conscious awareness a type of psychological openness and a degree of quiet, uninterrupted absorption in the perceptual object is necessary, be they places or pictures. As previously noted by Costello (2005, p. 278), Benjamin describes how modern urban living does not support a receptive relation between self and world, given that consciousness is typically engaged in a defensive monitoring of the surrounding environment. Benjamin links the collective suppression of involuntary memories with the waning of aura. Benjamin suggests, Costello confers, and I agree, that there is an alignment between an attitude of open receptiveness to the

world and the circumstances that support the surfacing of both involuntary memories and auratic experience.

Affect and beauty

This project seeks to make some redress of what is less apparent in our contemporary association with images; the viewer's somatic and affective relation with the artwork. Simon O'Sullivan (2001, p. 125) suggests revising our understanding of the aesthetic import of art, 'in an *immanent* sense - through recourse to the notion of *affect*'. Susan Best (2007) relates how the viewer's emotional response has been left out of contemporary enquiry and 'is not currently central to our understanding of the meaning of art, or to the experience of looking' (Best 2007, p. 505). According to Best, the psychological or inner dimension of looking has been dominated by feminist film theory. Best indicts Laura Mulvey's 1975 article, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' with irreversibly transforming 'our understanding of visual pleasure' (Best 2007, p. 507). Consequently, a lacuna exists in art history, a gap, with 'no adequate account of the simple fact of being moved, touched, engaged, call it what you will by a work of art' (Best 2007, p. 506). Best argues for a reorientation towards the aesthetic, enabling a rethinking of 'the gaze, visual pleasure and affective engagement with art' (Best 2007, p. 509).

This project works with the full definition of aesthetic which includes the emotionally affecting register of lived experience; as it is perceived, felt and sensed. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) definition of the term aesthetic includes; 'pertaining to sensuous perception, received by the senses'. I explore the matrix between the self and

the natural environment by studying how my body ‘responds and resonates’ (O’Sullivan 2001, p. 128) with the surrounding physical environment. My purpose is to trace connections between visual appearances and ‘hidden sensory and affective processes’ (Dubow 2008, p. 104), between the appearing world and somatically registered, felt sensations. My intention is to test how this matrix is made apparent and experiential, by means of the resulting artworks, which I argue, amplify and intensify subtle, nuanced and delicate responses between the human sensing apparatus and the visual field.

Sue Cataldi, in ‘Emotion, Depth and Flesh : A study of sensitive space’ describes how affecting relations are characterised by depth. Cataldi describes depth as the ‘distanced contact’ (Cataldi 1993, pp. 116-117) of being here and perceiving that I have access to over there in my seeing. From an experiential perspective, emotions also have spatial correlates, such as height, fall, range, throw, and distance. Therefore, emotions are not static mental states and ‘are intrinsically dynamic ... apprehended kinaesthetically’ (Cataldi 1993, p. 117) through the somatic register of the body.

In regarding artworks, Benjamin notes a receptive circumstance where the viewer standing in front of an artwork ‘is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art’ (Benjamin 1969, p. 238). I, however, would describe auratic relations as characterised by a movement in two directions; the viewer is pulled in, seduced and absorbed by recessive depths and at the same time, the *salient* aspect of the work resist this entry and push back, moving towards the viewer. I am describing a movement that is non-literal and implied; an understated feeling that is partially imagined, inferred or suggested and partially somatically registered as delicate, felt sensations.

Donn Welton (2015) in 'Bodily Intentionality, Affectivity, and Basic Affects', argues that affect correlates with mental intention and the physical, muscular impulse to action or withdrawal. Welton describes how *preferencing* (liking or disliking) which underlies our basic intentional attitude, is animated by the gamut of needs, wants and desires that orientate our response to the world. Preferencing is fast and fluid, often unconscious and 'both intentional and bodily in nature' (Welton 2015, p. 184). Preferencing instigates a movement, towards or away from an object and this movement can be physical or the mere sensation of pleasure or displeasure. However, the movement is not only in one direction. Welton observes that objects would lose their motivational impetus, without allure, 'without the valence of the object' (Welton 2015, p. 191). The valence of the perceptual object (or artwork), is not just its capacity to attract our attention, but the subtle and implied (non-literal) sense in which the object/work moves forward, towards the viewer.

Donn Welton describes our stance to the world as orientated by our affective responses. Affect like emotion, is registered both mentally and physically. Emotions, however, are overt comparative to the subtlety of basic affects which, it could be argued, subtend emotion, cognition and reflection. I am proposing that the interstice between self and world is felt; bodily, kinaesthetically and somatically.

I am in agreement with Perdita Phillips (2015) who reconceptualises beauty as communication, as moving between; as primarily relational. My intention is to work with the reflective surface and surrounding atmosphere, as suggested by Phillips 'as a living, active space' (Phillips 2015, p. 61), working with this space as a model for

exploring beauty as a 'pleasurable and complex reciprocity' (Steiner 2001, p. XXIV). Galen Johnson (2010, p. 5) writes 'the beautiful is neither purely subjective nor purely objective but occupies that in-between that is the interworld, the inter-subjective, the intercorporeal'. As I am working, as I am engaged in the practice; I explore how beauty is integrative between self and the world by giving my full attention to beauty as 'the leading feature of the reciprocal process' (Berleant 2013, p. 1).

Standing outside, alternatively observing the surrounding evening light and viewing the reflective surface of the water through the camera's viewfinder has taken on the character of contemplative practice. As I am looking through the viewfinder, I have trained myself to pay attention to and track somatic, visceral sensations. What might first arise as a sensation in the abdomen, the chest or the throat often has an accompanying emotional tenor and is further characterised by a sense of movement, such as expansion and contraction or rising and falling. I am attentive to the whole gamut of sensation, emotion and movement apprehended as a continual cycle of stimulus and response. I find myself tracing subtle threads of feeling, as they appear and slowly disappear.

It is evident to me that an emotional response to the visual world is 'suspended between the external situation and our inner consciousness' (Pallasmaa 2015, p. 141). My intention is to work with 'the capacity of our emotions to mirror and echo' the visual field (Pallasmaa 2015, p. 141). To work with beauty as a medium; that like aura 'envelops and physically connects - and thus blurs the boundaries between subject and object' (Hansen 2008, p. 351). In this context, beauty weaves a delicate thread of

emotive tonality, and as an aesthetic experience, beauty is a mental and a visceral pleasure, exquisitely and delicately contemplated.

In my experience, heightened and acute feelings which then dissipate suggests the mental picture of a single, luminous thread stretched so thin that it is barely perceptible, a thread which yet remains clear, bright, and sharp. An analogy could be the experience of listening to a bell where one can both audibly hear the sound and sense the physical vibration, following both the sound and the vibration, until the sound is inaudible, but the physical vibration lingers. The trace presence of the bell, as a physical sensation, is the best description of aura that I can offer at this stage.

As I am working, I often feel emotionally fragile and vulnerable, and this sensitivity focuses feelings of care. I find myself attentive to a type of *mirrored resonance* between my body, my emotional sensibility and the visual field. Somatic responses heighten, and emotional nuances intensify; as previously hidden aspects of the visual field appear to move forward. I am aware of myriad pressing environmental issues, and my response is to concentrate my appreciation for the wider ecology of life through this style of focused attention. I am in agreement with Scarry when she states that beauty ‘seems to place requirements on us for attending to the aliveness ... of our world, and for entering into its protection’ (Scarry 1999, p. 90). Wendy Steiner agrees that an ethical value is ‘central to the meaning of beauty’ (Steiner 2001, p. xxiii).

To conclude, I am defining an artwork’s atmosphere as the matrix in which various sensings and sensitivities become apparent, where the ephemeral and transitory

experiences of affect and beauty are registered. It is these immaterial, fleeting yet exact affects, which over time, collectively structure the atmosphere of auratic experience. Taken together, atmosphere, involuntary memories, affect and beauty structure a relational aesthetic; *the auratic field* where the world and the self are apparent in their relations to each other and in which these relations: *appear*.

Chapter Four – The Phenomenology of the Work

The ontology of photography

This study notes the tension between two major theoretical positions as described by Geoffrey Batchen (1997, p. 21); the formalist argument that photography's identity is a consequence of nature and the post-modernist stance that culture determines photography. One position holds that photographs, in general, are extracted from their source in nature (as the real), and the other emphasises photography as a culturally constructed medium (this perspective also calls attention to "nature" as a culturally premised concept). Rather than taking one side or the other of what has been historically a polemic debate, my intention is to work simultaneously at both ends of a spectrum delimited by notions of nature as the real world and culture as defining, situating and contextualising our access to that world. In taking this position I am aligning the project with a 'dynamic enfoldment of opposites, a movement that incorporates without synthesising the conceptual poles nature-culture, real-ideal, general-particular, science-art, object-subject, reflection-expression' (Batchen 1997, p. 81).

In considering vernacular photography, a visually analogous relation can be expected to hold between the photographic referent and the depicted, for instance under standard conditions a photograph of a shoe can be expected to look like a shoe. The photograph looks like a shoe because a shoe was in front of the camera lens at the time of image capture. Photography and painting differ in that for photography a causal relation holds

between the depiction and the depicted object. Because of this relation photographs can be considered as evidential in a manner that paintings cannot. For instance, drivers licence photos would lose their veracity if they were not both iconic (looking like) and indexical (pointing to). As noted by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, this evidential aspect has a history of relevance to the theoretical understanding and underpinnings of photography (Solomon-Godeau 2007, pp. 259-260), such that, historically the index has been considered as essential to the nature of the photographic image (ref Barthes 1984; Krauss 1977).

Diarmuid Costello and Dawn Phillips (2009), suggest theoretical writing has tended to drive a wedge between the indexical relation between the photographic subject and the image and the intentional contribution of the photographer. Costello and Phillips describe Roger Scruton's argument; that given the automatism of the technical apparatus, a 'photograph stands in a causal relation to its subject while an (ideal) painting stands in an intentional relation' (Costello & Phillips 2009, p. 16).

From an art world perspective, the problem with the perceived objectivity of the photographic medium and the position that "the world made the work" is how this claim undermines the actions, purpose and intentions of the artist. As Walter Benn Michaels puts it, the idea that 'the world and the camera (not the artist) made the photograph' (Michaels 2015, p. 94) has been a cause for anxiety. The indexical relation between world and image, has historically, according to Solomon-Godeau 'mitigated against the acceptance of photography as a legitimate medium for art making' (Solomon-Godeau 2007, p. 260).

Photographers who construct and then photograph models (Thomas Demand) or otherwise stage the scene in front of the lens (Jeff Wall) have pushed against causality, emphasising a “the world did not make it, I did” approach, thereby laying claim to a greater degree of artistic intention. Paradoxically and in counterpoint, the visual accuracy and technological automatism of the camera are enrolled by Gerhard Richter to underplay his subjective input, to claim an objective distance otherwise unrealisable within the field of painting. Costello (2007) makes these points in discussing the photography of Wall and the paintings of Richter respectively.

The acceptance of photography as a legitimate art form has largely superseded Roger Scruton’s position. However, the general thrust of arguments, such as Scruton’s, has had an impact. I would like to point out that responses have often swung the pendulum in the other direction, emphasising the artist’s intentions, specifically by undermining and calling into question the causal relation between image and world. However, as Costello and Phillips (2009) point out; causation is not in a zero-sum opposition to intentionality and vice versa.

Causality undergirds the photograph’s evidential status and supports a specifically photographic relation to reality; the idea that photography has a ‘distinctive relation to the real’ (Michaels 2015, p. 13). Photography’s access or ‘relation to the real’ (Solomon-Godeau 2007, p. 260) is supported by the perceived objectivity of the technological and mechanical apparatus of the camera. The ‘mind-independent’ (Costello & Phillips 2009, p. 16) status of the camera elicits the conviction that what the image shows was once a state of affairs or a circumstance that happened in the world

(Costello 2007, p. 83). Therefore, no matter how distorted, ambiguous or abstract: photographs are produced by the world (Campany 2007, p. 312).

As Margaret Iverson points out, the causal relation between the referent and the depicted does not necessarily depend upon a photographic image appearing as an analogous, visual copy. Therefore, the link between the index and the icon ‘can be uncoupled’ (Iverson 2007, p. 93). My approach enrolls the analysis of the apparatus of the camera offered by David Campany (2007, p. 304). Campany links the shutter with time, the lens with analogous association and the light sensor with the indexical relation between world and image. My intention is to emphasise the role of the camera’s light sensor, as a means of highlighting the presence of light in the resulting images.

In terms of the MFA series of works, I am proposing that the autonomous stature of the image is predicated upon the causal relation between the light in front of the lens and the camera’s digital sensor. My claim is the images evidence ‘*perceptual contact*’ (Costello & Phillips 2009, p. 10), between light and the sensor. Joel Snyder (2007) offers a counter argument to the index as the defining feature of either the photographic medium or the specifically photographic relation to the real. However, the debate on the status of the index often falls back to the position that the only evidence supplied by a photographic image is the evidence of photons, of particles of light contacting the sensor (Frizot 2007, p. 271). I argue that my approach sits comfortably within this strict parameter, given the specific investigative apparatus (the combination of a camera, a bowl of water and the surrounding atmospheric lighting conditions) as the means of studying image-forming light. This point aligns with Patrick Maynard’s account of the

technical basis of photography as image, rather than picture forming (Costello & Phillips 2009, p. 12).

Given the discussion in the preceding chapter connecting the disappearance of aura with a shift in subjective experience, my intention here is to postulate a similar sensitivity between the photographic index and the disappearance of access to the real. My interest in the index is less to support an essentialist approach to defining what photography is and more in the perception of what constitutes access to the real.

It is not the aim of this project to claim access to an unmediated nature; the purpose is to situate the desire for direct and unequivocal relations with “nature” in the context of a heightened sensitivity towards this access. What is becoming rare and endangered is not nature (even though various pressures are increasingly pushing natural ecologies towards collapse). What in my mind is becoming rare and endangered is our shared cultural capacity to realise and acknowledge the *distant and autonomous* status of the world around us. These concerns are possibly more apparent with reference to an image, such as Fig. 20, on the following page.



Fig. 20. Susan van der Beek, *October 21, 2015*

The relation between the photographic image and what was in front of the lens is not straight forward in an iconic or looking like sense. Fig. 20 does not present any identifiable object, subject or scene and yet I argue that it functions pictorially as a landscape. The image is composed of a foreground and a background and pictorial elements such as colour, tonal gradation, lights and darks. In actuality, the iconic aspect of the image is constructed, in part, by the placement of a bowl of water in the foreground and, in part, by the viewer's familiarity with the pictorial tradition of landscape representation.

Within the background section, softly toned shadowy vertical marks (on the left) contrast with brighter marks, these ephemeral marks do not have a positive shape but appear to be visible only in contrast to the darker or lighter areas that delineate their form. It is as if these linear elements move in and out of visibility, appearing when they are at the centre and disappearing whenever they are on the periphery of vision. The open porous texture of the background contrasts with the foreground's denser, tighter and more concentrated surface. Coloured bands appear to drift down the front surface, and at the same time, there is a recessive depth in the middle of the image (where a light blue gives way to a darker blue). I find there is a subtle and implied movement between recessive depth (as if the middle of the image opens up into an unverifiable distance) and the drifting bands of coloured light on the front surface. I find the smaller, compact foreground and the larger comparatively dilated background read as contracted and expanded versions of each other.

In my experience of this image, correspondences between the various elements of the image infer a subtle sense of movement, (pulsing, dilating, contracting and expanding). The image is not still in the normative sense and offers the viewer an opportunity to re-evaluate the common assumption that photographs are perceptually static objects. However, it takes time for the viewer to notice the subtle play of drifting, receding, coalescing, pulling apart, appearing and disappearing. The registration of movement develops over time, and it is in this manner, that the image is durational. In my reading, the above image emphasises the physical presence of light; the manner in which light is perceptually present in the viewing of the image. By emphasising the indexical relation

between light and light sensor, my intention is to underscore the appearing rather than the appearance of light.

Campany correlates the camera's light sensitive surface with touch, contact and the felt sense of light (Campany 2007, p. 31). I am aiming to similarly emphasise the connection between light and light sensitive surface and between touch and physical proximity; as if light were pressed or filtered through a screen or a sieve: as if the printed paper surface is an analogue of the pressing of light to a light sensitive surface. My intention, therefore, is to emphasise the photograph 'as a trace or emanation of its referent' (Michaels 2015, p. 94) that continues to echo that contact.

The appearing world

This project teases the indexical and the iconic apart and attempts to underplay the iconic while emphasising light as evidence of the appearing world. The approach aims to withhold the visual identity of the location, therefore relieving the place of photographic capture from carrying the burden of representation (Tagg 1988). Refusing the verification of the location circumvents a common response, where a landscape photograph is registered by the viewer as an artefact from a different place and time. The purpose is to shift relations commonly held between natural environments and photographic images; to avoid a type of speculative disassociation between the work and the viewer that occurs when photographs render places as desired experiential objects located elsewhere and else-when. Whereas, emphasising the causal relation between the world in front of the lens and the resulting image enables the work to stand

on its own, as evidential, as appearing. Therefore, the image enacts a turn towards the viewer (without undermining relations between the image and the world).

In this project, the visual field, “the world in front of the camera lens”, is constructed in part by the mechanical operations of the camera lens, in part by the reflective surface of water and in part by the physical environment and atmospheric conditions. This visual field is accessible only by looking through the viewfinder and is not available to the naked eye. Thus the visual field is the subject of the looking and at the same time the means of looking. The visual field, magnified by the camera’s lens and additional extension rings, is only a small portion of the wider visual field available to the naked eye. This small magnified portion of the wider visual field is encapsulated within the frame, as pre-given by the camera’s design and construction (Flusser 1983).

Within this rectilinear structure, another framing device is apparent. This frame is composed of the reflective surface in the foreground and the surrounding atmospheric conditions forming the background. The foreground comprises approximately one-fifth and the background the remainder of the image plane. Foreground and background are separated by either a sharply or ambiguously defined horizon, which divides the picture plane, resulting in a secondary frame working structurally within the images.

Although the visual field is specifically constructed and composed, this does not diminish the indexical relation between the world in front of the camera lens and the resulting images. The causal relation between world and image is if anything, heightened by the consistent parameters. Tight and consistent framing is a strategy to

contain the study, to focus without distraction on the relationship between the sky and the reflective surface of water. My intention is to emphasise the direct and unequivocal relations that hold between the world and the work. Upholding the idea, commonly associated with vernacular photography, that the image is the result of a causal relation between the world and the work means that it is appropriate to consider the resulting images as evidence of the world; in its appearing.

Fig. 21, (next page), exemplifies this approach. The lower portion of the frame is flooded with illumination, colour and fullness and dominated by the sensual, physicality of the surface of water. The lower edge of the image, weighted with a deep blue-black, provides tonal contrast with the rest of the image and the darker tones surrounding the body of water result in the comparative salience of the foreground. The foreground appears to hover or float and paradoxically for a still image; *to move*. The reflective surface is after all, quite literally, a moving body of light.

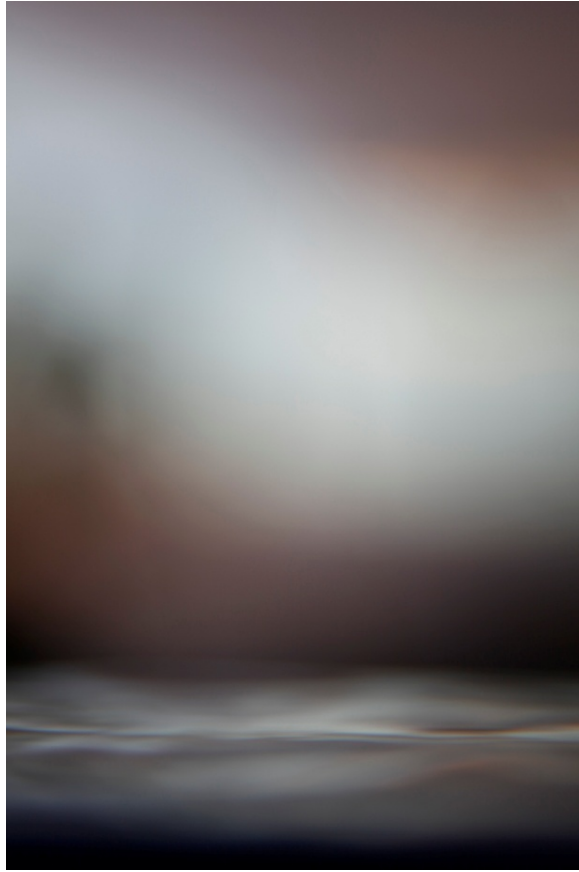


Fig. 21. Susan van der Beek, *untitled i (from White Beach)*, 2015

Fig. 21 functions as an aesthetic model by engaging relations between proximity and distance, salience and recession, surface and depth, contraction and expansion. These internal relations: felt as the *containment and release* of forces, pressures, weights and attractions are aimed to stimulate and engage the sympathetic responses of the viewer.

Another concern is to consider how the camera extends the eye by way of the mechanical prosthesis. If the camera can be thought of as a looking prosthesis held to the eye, the bowl of water is another attachment held to the camera lens. I am looking simultaneously through and with the aid of this whole apparatus. I work with this

apparatus as a means of visual immersion, to experientially blur the boundaries between the viewer and the view/the self and the world.

Aspects of the photographic apparatus; the “lens” of the bowl of water, the lens of the camera and the lens of my eye are characterised by proximal relations. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) lists three definitions of proximal, ‘[l]ying very near or close to something ... [s]ituated towards the centre of the body, or the point of origin or attachment of a limb, bone or other structure ... [a]ppplied to stimuli immediately responsible for a perception or sensation’. All three definitions are relevant to the manner in which I am using the word proximal. I am working with the bowl of water as a visual prosthesis which captures distant light; bringing the light closer to the camera lens, the eye and the body. I am working with this apparatus to study relations between self and the surrounding, physical, analogue world.

The reflective surface of water mirrors the sky so that the sky is doubled, given again; this time in proximity. It is relevant to note that in general, photographic subjects are physically close to or in eyeshot of the camera and therefore ‘there is an idea of proximity ... built into the photographic process’ (Iverson 2007, p. 140). My intention is to amplify the photographic relation between physical proximity and reality.

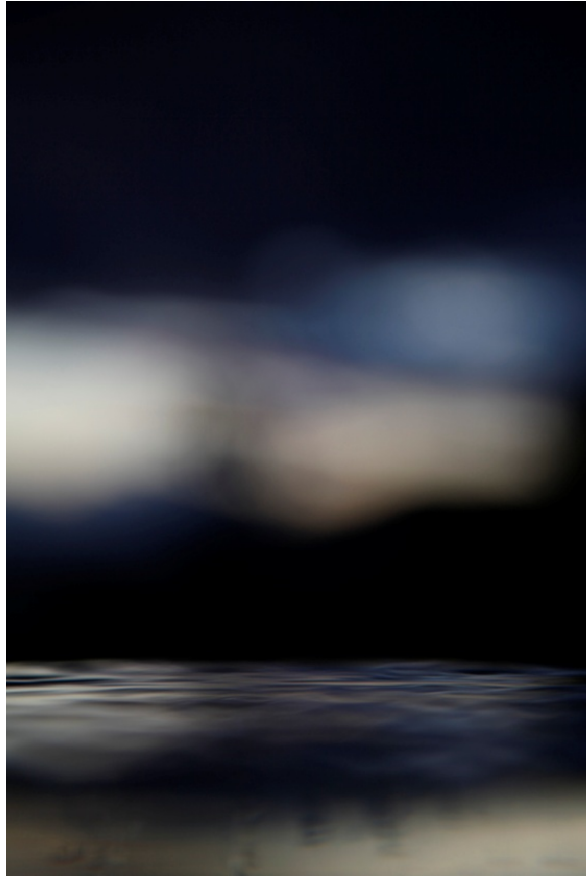


Fig. 22. Susan van der Beek, *untitled iii (from White Beach)*, 2015

Proximity is highlighted throughout the project by emphasising salience, detail and complexity in the lower portion of the image. For instance, in Fig. 22 above, I have accentuated proximity by flooding the lowest portion of the image. This overflowing provides vertical depth at the lowest section of the image plane. The reflective surface appears to recede, across the horizontal plane and fall toward the bottom of edge of the image. The foreground demonstrates both recession and overflow; implied movements which can be characterised as away from and towards the viewer.

In my experience of viewing Fig. 22, I find that my eye continually moves between the sky and the water. I can see the transcription of the sky to the reflective surface as a tight, compact and contained presentation, and then I move back up to the sky, and I feel encompassed by an undefined, diffuse softness. Salience and recession, contraction and expansion considered in connection to each other imply subtle movement. These implied movements are the means by which I have been investigating the relations between proximity and distance.

The sense of implied movement demonstrated across the body of work, is relevant to how the images can be regarded as modelling perceptual relations. My purpose has been to explore how a photographic image, with its direct and unequivocal relations to the world, could amplify and intensify subtle spatio-temporal correspondences, registered at the level of affect.



Fig. 23. Susan van der Beek, *June 8, 2015*

In viewing Fig. 23 above, I find myself continually looking from the foreground to the background and from the background to the foreground: tracing the translation of sky to the reflective surface. The clouds in the foreground more closely resemble the clouds in the sky at the time of capture than the backgrounded sky. Distorted by soft focus the background does not present as it did to the naked eye. The reflective surface of water gives accurate clues as to the actual visual form of the sky, even when distorted by turbulence. Therefore the iconic aspect of the analogical appearance of the sky is disrupted in the background and is comparatively accurate in the foreground.

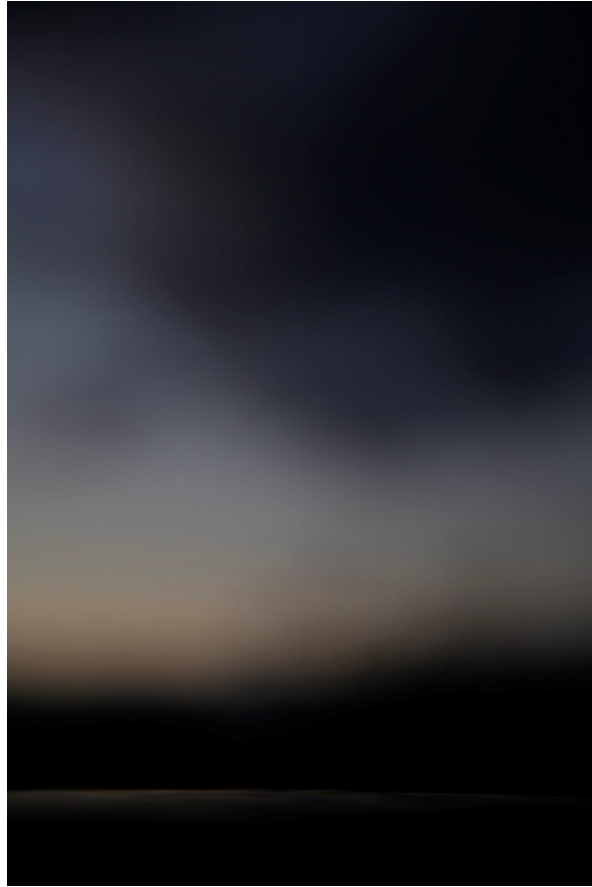


Fig. 24. Susan van der Beek, *untitled v (from White Beach)*, 2015

My experience of Fig. 24 above hinges on the attenuated presence of the reflective surface reduced to a barely present, thin line in-relation-to the dark mass of blue/black cloud above. The opening and expansion of the sky in-relation-to this linear element, stretched to the point of invisibility evokes an experience that is difficult to express in words. While working, I often experience an emotional event which simultaneously maintains tension, without giving way, between immersion in an effulgent fullness and an empty, gutted feeling, a coming up to an edge beyond which I have no knowledge, no standing and no experience.

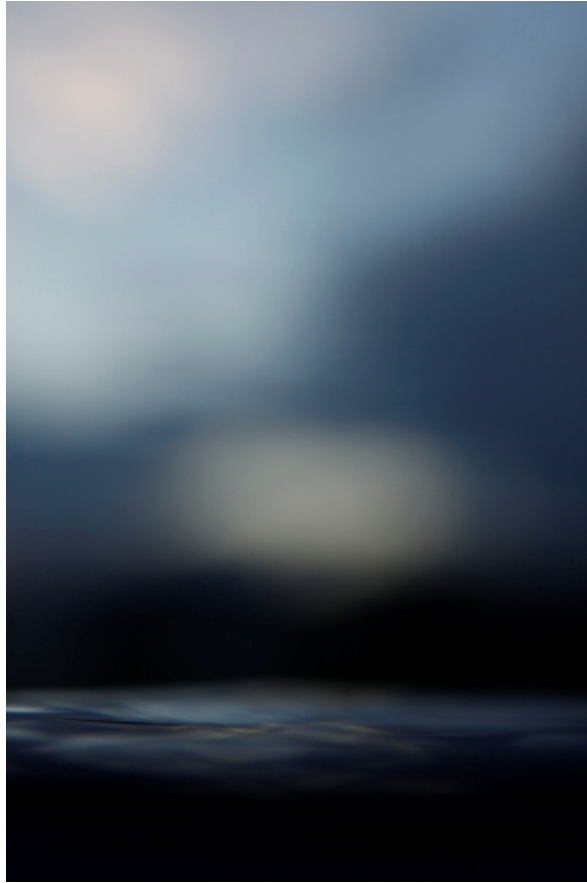


Fig. 25. Susan van der Beek, *untitled iii* (from the *sky bowl series*), 2014

Fig. 25 above demonstrates relations between proximity and distance by modelling a complexity of subtle relations within the simple structure of foreground and background. The surface of water floats between a dark mass above and below. The translation of the sky to the reflective surface is delicate and precise. The effectiveness of the image hinges on the detail and definition of this transcription in-relation-to the softness and openness of the sky. A central, ovoid cloud form hovers above the surface of water and an almost magnetic attraction appears to be in play between this small form and the water body. I find myself caught between falling into the cavity of the

watery pool and extending, stretching, dispersing into the striated sections of the sky that appear to be expanding and drifting apart.

In summary

Some comments about the body of work as a whole: I have maintained the perspective of the singular standing viewer in-relation-to a view, and I have aimed to translate this perspective to a gallery displayed two-dimensional artwork. My purpose is to mirror the standing posture of a viewer, to indicate that the images are intended to include and engage the viewer's whole body. The work stands in-relation-to the viewer's body, and both orientation and scale can suggest an invitation to a viewer, to imagine entry into the work as if through a door. However, more importantly, scale and orientation reflect the autonomous stature of the work, the work's valence, back to the viewer.

My analysis has shown that the images demonstrate relational tensions and attractions between proximity and distance. In my experience of the images, my aesthetic response and the autonomous stature of the work exert an almost gravitational pull on each other. At the furthest reaches of distance, this attraction is at its most acute (I am aiming to keep in mind a sensitive and affecting attraction to light). At the same time, the work appears to amplify the full presence and autonomous force of distance; supporting the viewer's immersive experience of that distance.

Foregrounds and backgrounds are mediated by either sharply or softly defined horizons. Therefore the delineation between these portions of the image plane is either abrupt or gradual. The central area of the foreground, the reflective surface of water, is generally in focus and the entire background is soft. I find that I read these portions of the image plane in-relation-to each other, and comparative to the backgrounds, I read the foregrounds as compressed, contained, concentrated, and the backgrounds as expansive, diffuse and atmospheric. A relation of contraction and expansion between foreground and background is inferred by the relatively sharp/soft focus and proportionally smaller/larger sections of the image plane.

Foregrounds appear as either perpendicular, flat and closed (not allowing the eye through) or as horizontally recessive (allowing the eye through). Recessive, horizontal surfaces can appear to compress distance across a small section of the image plane and suggest virtual or imagined movement away from the front planar surface. The lightest areas at the front of the image plane can simultaneously appear to float off the paper substrate. The manner, in which various sections of the image appear to be simultaneously moving away from, towards or beyond the front surface of the picture plane, evokes a dynamic yet subtle sense of movement.

This dynamic, active, mobile, fluid aspect differs from image to image. The viewer is looking at a still photographic image; therefore any sense of movement is subjectively experienced by the viewer. In my experience of viewing these works, the images appear to shift and open under the eye, so that looking results in further interest, exceeding my capacity to define or pin down the experience.

Unlike a snapshot that immediately discloses all of its information, taking the time to look is crucial to the viewer's aesthetic experience. The intention is to engage the viewer contemplatively, to support the experience of opening, unfolding and revealing common to attentive practice of any kind. The images implicate a style of looking best described as slow, meditative and absorptive. However, this style of looking is not passive as it involves active, perceptual engagement on behalf of the viewer.

In my experience, I tend to give an image a greater degree of scrutiny and engagement when an image surprises me. Scarry (1999, pp. 14-15) talks about how previously unrecognised beauty, calls upon us to re-examine our attitudes towards the world and I am hoping to activate a similar response in regarding visual images. I am asking the viewer (myself included) to review their understanding regarding aesthetic relations between photographic images and viewers.

Conclusion

No longer is it a matter of speaking about space and light, but of making space and light, which are *there*, speak to us. There is no end to this questioning, since the vision to which it is addressed is itself a question ... What is depth, what is light? ... And what are they, finally, not only for the mind but for themselves? (Merleau-Ponty 1993, p. 138).

Throughout this project, I have explored a philosophical enquiry through an experiential, phenomenological approach to photographic practice. I am intrigued by the perceptual encounter between myself and the world when I give the encounter my full attention. The images, in modelling the convention of landscape composition, (foreground and background mediated by the horizon) also model the basic structure of perceptual awareness; to be aware, is to be aware of something against a general background.

The overarching theme of this project has been to identify and bring forward aspects of the self/world relation that subtend everyday experience. I have explored how the perceptual encounter, the appearing of the world, when attended to directly, when brought to the foreground of awareness; is a continuously fresh experience. Throughout this project, I have worked with a phenomenological approach based on consistent formal parameters. The approach focuses on and delimits the enquiry to the question of the appearing world. In this manner, the experience of looking is both an active form of engagement with and a question to the world.

Given how the images are partially constructed by the placement of a bowl of water, the images do not provide evidence of the appearance of the location and the viewer cannot infer a referential link between the image and the place of image capture (as is the case with conventional landscape images). By undercutting this common association with landscape photography, my intention has been two fold, first to divert any disassociation between the viewer and the work and second to emphasise the work as a spatially and temporally present visual object.

To further emphasise this distinction between representation and presentation I have drawn upon photography's familial ties with drawing, printmaking and painting; through an emphasis on colour, tonal gradation, linear mark making, positive and negative space, recessive depths and salient lights.

At the same time, I have collected images in the physical environment with a conventional digital camera, with minimal post-production manipulation. I have produced the images as pigment prints on a paper substrate, with the aim of emphasising the specifically photographic relation between the world in front of the camera lens and the resulting images.

What the images show is a field of light structured by the relations between proximity and distance: an appearing world. The light in front of the camera is compositionally organised into a foreground and a background. The foreground/background convention acts as a secondary frame, an aperture through which light arrives, and at the same time,

the images function as landscapes, partially by means of the viewer's familiarity with the foreground/background convention.

I have worked with the landscape convention as akin to an architectural structure or an acoustic echo chamber, and I have worked with the bowl of water, as like a bell that reverberates and resonates. My objective is to amplify the relation between atmospheric light and the small body of water encapsulated in a glass bowl (reflecting light and responsive to air movement) and the camera's light sensor; to emphasise a sensitive relation between the world and the image.

The work is animated by the relations between proximity and distance; as if these relations are forces exerting gravitational attractions and pressures, pulling and tugging at the sensibility of the viewer. I have explored how the landscape convention pared down to its basic structure demonstrates and models aspects of the embodied self/environing world relation. I have discovered how this basic structure is mirrored, or registered by the body, somatically at the level of affect. Importantly for still photographic objects, the works evoke or imply movement.

Consistently throughout this project, I have defined aura as significant to relations between self/world, world/work, and work/viewer. I propose that an embodied perspective is at the core of these aesthetic relations, stimulating a heightened sensitivity toward experiential, negotiated and reciprocal engagement. I propose the images engage kinaesthetic awareness and the viewer responds to the subtle spatial and temporal dimensions of the work viscerally; at the level of blind, felt sensations. My purpose in

accentuating spatial relations internal to the artwork is to enable this dynamic to activate the perceptual encounter/engagement between the work and the viewer.

The degree to which the images read as produced by the natural environment; the circumambient atmosphere, the specific conditions of weather, and particles of light, amplifies and underscores the sense in which the work stands on its own. Reading the work as autonomous, as produced by the confluence of the world and the mechanical apparatus of the camera is exactly the relation between the world and the image that I am aiming to amplify. The aura of the work, the relational exchange between the viewer and the work is predicated on this distance. My intention is that this distance is brought into contact with the viewer's immersive, absorptive, integrative experience of the work; as an experience of intimate distance.

Within my photographic practice there remains a question regarding how the images come to be; are the images predominantly produced by my intentions and decisions or is it the world showing up in front of the lens that produces the work? Does the viewer construct the work partially out of their familiarity with both the traditional landscape genre and their experiential memories? The work does not aim to resolve these tensions but allows these questions to remain open and in play.

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